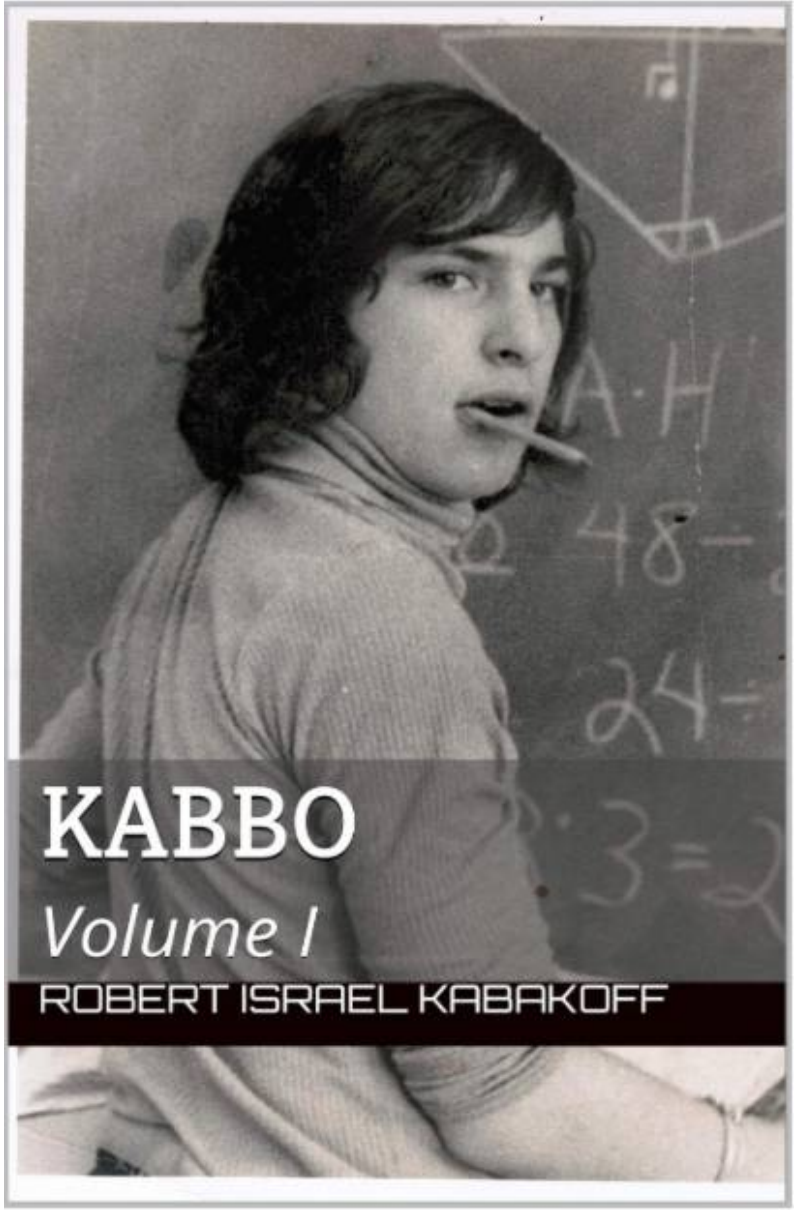

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In memory of three lost brothers,
***David Klugman*, *Jimmy Hickey* and *Alan Koenigsdorf*,**
with eternal gratitude and respect, I've not forgotten.

Preface

Growing up is a lot of fun, but not for everybody. Recently, after telling one of these tales to my nephew, he asked if there were more good times than bad ones. Interesting question. I'd never considered it quite that simply before. Pressed for an answer, what came out off the top of my thoughts was surprisingly true and succinct. *I had a lot of excitement, mostly brought on by my own decisions and actions.* Yes, growing up as a teenager in the seventies is probably not a lot different than growing up any other time, except in the ways it was. This memoir would be about that, with one distinctive caveat: I never really got there. Not then. My teenage years were a time of intense, existential, turmoil: drugs, alcohol, hospitals, heartbreaks, fistfights, journeys, abandonment, incarceration, and homelessness. These are the tales of a troubled Jewish American teenager living in a post-hippie, Clockwork Orange fantasy world, trying to work things out and find his place in the real world while narrowly avoiding the abyss. Apart from that, it was a blast.

Robert I. Kabakoff, Jomtien Beach, Siam, January 30, 2019

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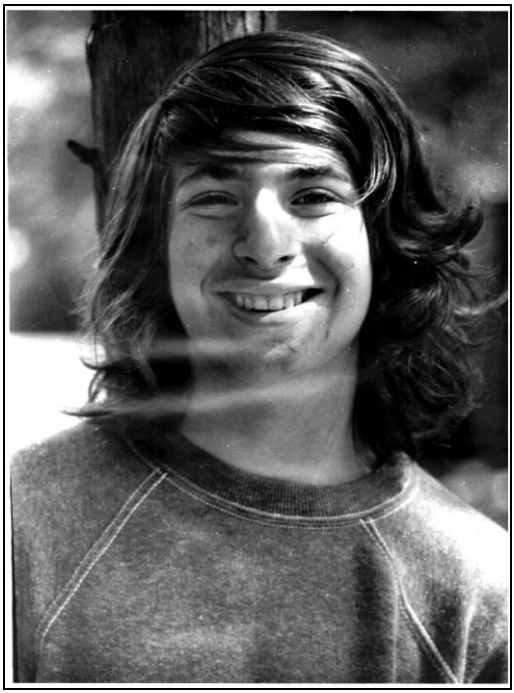
Kabbo `72

"*Well I'll be damned, here comes your ghost again − but that*'s *not unusual, it's just that the moon is full and you happened to call...* "
(Joan Baez)

Look then I said there was this time when I felt free. Really free. *Fuck*'*n* goddamn free. You know how *fuck*'*n* free that is? Way goddamn free. Really fuck'n free. I mean out there. On the road, doin' miles'n flashin' smiles. The great American telescopic freeway. No tolls. Just go! No tolls barred. "Freeway" – get it? *Macro velocity!*

Well I got it – and they got it too. *Never mind...*



At Buck's Rock, 1971, the year before.

It was me and these two other white kids, I think my hair was the longest, we were out there, I mean we left at about 5 AM, packed some bags, grabbed some sandwiches and left. Just left. Outa' there. *Seeee`ya!* Wouldn't wanna *beeee`ya!* With our parents on their way up from the city to get us. *Ha!* Whata' joke! Didn't tell anyone, just figured that you know, when everybody at Buck's Rock got up that morning, when they came to get us to formally kick us out we'd be already gone. *Gone! Shazaam! Surprise!* We were spittin' back into the face of undeserved shame and humiliation and about goddamn time too. I mean for shit's sake, we were almost fifteen fuck'n goddamn years old already, all of us. *Whoosh!* Like the wind. *Whoosh!* "*I'm ridin' on a freeway...* "

It was these stupid, Japbitch girls that made us have to leave that day, that fine summer morning in early July. Must have been about '72. No, yeah, it *was* 1972. Still a cool time. Not very cool, but cool still`n all. I mean we were listening to *Hot Rocks*, Alice Cooper's *School's Out* and Frank Zappa. Cooper sucked except for that, and maybe one or two others. Maybe, but definitely a clown, using a girl's name and a guillotine to decapitate a doll's head on stage, a big deal to a twelve year old, he could have at least cut off one of his fingers to make a real point, whatever it mighta' been, but Zappa was an artist. He had the balls to name his daughter *Moonunit.* Moonunit? Moonunit! Not once before and not once after did I ever hear of anyone or anything, *ever*, called a Moonunit. Not even NASA has anything or anybody named Moonunit. I mean you gota' hand it to him. Not just Moon or Moonbeam or Sunshine or Starflake or some other run of the mill type of ordinary hippie shit but Moon Unit. *A unit of moon*. He was real. Can you imagine a little girl going around kindergarten and quite seriously introducing herself to parents and teachers, not to mention other kids as *Moonunit*, Moonunit Zappa. How `bout when a cop pulls her over and asks to see her driver's license, MOONUNIT!? *Whoa!* Real. Oh yeah – here's Madam Moonunit, a unit of moon she is, *Moonunit* Zappa, and by the way, Alice, just for the record? School was already out.

You see, the thing was, getting back to the sorceresses' apprentices from middle-class Hell, they snitched on us. Ratted us out. Told lies about us. It was about a half dozen of them that came with us each day and enjoyed the fruits of our risk. Smoked and joked. Blondes and brunettes. A cackling clique of cavorting cunts. One day, the cunts of a feather flocked together right over to the director's office and dropped a big dime on us. Why? I guess I'll never really know why. Women, *who ever knows?* They told ol' Ernst Bulova, the venerable, Viennese psychiatrist turned camp director that we had pot. That *we took them* into the woods to smoke pot. *TO SMOKE POT!* OH MY GOD!!! We took them. Lead them by the hand I suppose, against their wills I would gather from hearing the charge and every day, forced them, over and over to inhale the poison, to laugh at our stupid jokes and to keep coming back for more. Well, Ernst bought it. I mean he already had our parents' money so what the hey, *right? Fuck'm!* Must have been all those years at psychiatrist training school that made him so damn street smart and business savvy, either that or his own *winner-take-all* instincts. Guess he figured that if they told him they musta' told their parents too and that couldn't go down with out reply, an epilogue hada' be attached to that tale reading "*and the boys were immediately sent home*." True or not, the cunts put him in check and the refugee put us in mate. A plot to smoke pot! Grounds for instant dismissal. And that's what he did. We were instantly and unceremoniously dismissed. DIS*missed*. Hello! No refund. Repeat, no refund. X number of thousands of dollars and no refund. Must have been in the contract. A call came from over the loudspeaker, rarely if ever used lest it interrupt the natural bullshit and tranquil beauty of the rich, New Milford woodlands that we, the boys in bunk whatever its name was, (bunks were like sometimes named like from Tolkien's *Middle Earth* or Fingal's Cave or Toadstool or Cloverleaf or Dogshitpatch, *how cute*) were wanted in the office now. There we were told, *told*, not asked what happened, but told, to now call our parents and tell them that we needed to be picked up in the morning – camp was over. It was like five o'clock in the afternoon and he wanted us out by like 7 AM the next day. After making the calls and

on the way back to the bunk, the shame of our circumstance, (the whole camp knew right away) and the anger felt at our betrayal inspired a thought: *why wait for them to come and pick us up?* Why have a ruined summer? We didn't do anything that wrong. We didn't hurt anybody, we were just tryin' to live, to have some fun, to enjoy ourselves. What was so wrong? And what about the girls, what about Marko, why weren't they being kicked out too? Why us? Why just the three of us? Why *me?* It wasn't even my pot. Repeat. *It wasn't my pot*. I didn't have any to bring up. I was just fourteen years old. If the girls were brought out to the woods by the boys with the pot to smoke – well then – *so was I*. No? Besides all that, the bigger issue was *should we have to suffer for someone else's bullshit values? No!* Did anybody ever ask us what we thought when they made up the rules? *No!* Then why should we have to play along with a game we didn't help make? Pot was fun! Pot was cool! *Pot was ours!* They were tryin' to take from us and make us feel bad about the one thing we really liked! Well, not without a fight they wouldn't. Too cool, too proud, and too standup to say any of this, we held it all in and just let the outrage simmer. Boy, were we pissed, betrayed and humiliated, made examples of, but played the stoic martyr, antiheroes and with a certain dignity appropriate to the occasion, carried on. Like the condemned walking their last mile, we, the three about to be crucified marched back from the office (without saluting anyone) to the bunk to make our plan. It was unanimous. *Fuck this!* Let's go by ourselves. Outa' here! On our terms, in our time and on our way – as best as we could given the current conditions we'd take off on our own. We'd make the break before dawn, head out on the road and be halfway to paradise before anybody was the wiser. Like Ford, as the commercial said, we had a better idea. We didn't really know where we'd go or what we'd do, but one thing was clear, we were done here. Yesterday's news. Finished. Summer at Buck's Rock Work Camp was over. Over and out. Japbitch girls! Phony, shaking, Parkinson's disease havin' refugee motherfucker Ernst was canceling our reservation. No rain check, no nothin'. You know, he looked like the old man character played by Keir Dullea in the last scenes of 2001: *A Space Odyssey*.

Remember that shriveled, old, white skinned, blue-eyed geezer, tottering around spillin' his food and pointing his bony finger at the embryo space baby? Well that was `ol Dr. Ernst Bulova. Looked just like'm only uglier. Ernst would float around the campus like an ancient European zombie, trembling, nodding, and smiling eerily at folks with his pale, blue, evil, Austrian eyes, as if everything amused him. Stranger thing was, as he leered and hovered from place to place, projecting this ominously spectral image, suddenly appearing, quietly, said almost nothing out loud, like he was too cool and deep, too profound and smartly sophisticated for anyone to hear what he might have had to say about anything. Like he knew it all and his wisdom transcended mere words and the need to speak them. Except when he used words to tell us to get out. *That* he wasn't too transcendent to say. And even then he made it brief. Story was, he was some kinda' World War II refugee. I could never figure out if he was supposed to have been a good guy running from the Nazis, or a Nazi running from the good guys. Somehow, it seemed the specific details were left deliberately vague and ambiguous, from the looks of him though, it coulda' been either. He was a *refugee*, that was all was said, a big-deal "refugee," and a shrink, that was all we knew, so he was supposed to get respect. A hushed reverence. Either way I wasn't impressed. To me he was a pretentious nobody on a major ego trip. A legend in his own mind. Anybody got the time? Yeah, he was supposedly the watchmaker's brother. Another phony big deal for our parents to impress their friends with. You had to have an interview in his Central Park West apartment and be personally approved by him before he would deem you worthy of coming to his big-deal, avant-garde, artist bullshit camp. There you could be awakened in the middle of the night by the clang of the big iron gong hanging from an old tree limb by the mess hall to go run and watch a pregnant horse give birth. Impressed? I thought it was pretty disgusting myself, although somewhat voyeuristically curious. I wasn't like those pukey faggots that thought it was "*so beautiful*." Gimme a break please. If it was so fuck'n beautiful what was all that snot and blood doin' all over the place? Personally, I don't like seein' one living thing emerge from the body of another

living thing. Maybe I'm missing something but it just plain fails to turn me on. In fact, I find it kinda' spooky. Among the other fascinating attractions this bourgeois make-believe counterculture for a big, fat, price tag place had to offer was twiddling your bored thumbs on the lawn as *love-beaded, upper-class* pussies played Bach chamber music on violins and such while lesbian pottery babes sat in circles around them staring with deeply affected silent appreciation. *Heavy!* Pass the trail mix please. Nonstop thrills, a real *Cotton Comes to Harlem* bash. They must have invented yogurt and tofu there. Birkenstock wonderland. Silk-screening, metal sculpting, big, painted papier-mâché giraffes on a hill – The Whole Earth Catalogue – the whole *bullshit* catalogue. Even Arlo Guthrie woulda' been nauseous at the sight of these self-indulgent, smug and egotistical hypocrites. Woody himself woulda' puked. Joan Baez woulda' smacked someone. The year before, just about making it through the summer, I played DJ on the camp's radio station once or twice a week and acted in one or two of the shows. That was fun. There was some cool shit, like at the end, last night of summer at Buck's Cock, I mean *Rock,* hearing Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Tarkus* the first time, the wondrous Moog Synthesizer, *whata*' *sound!* Part keyboard, part space shuttle – they played it to a colored strobe-light show on a professionally designed outdoor sound stage. My heart jumped, everything in me and around me pulsated to the frenetic, techno-prehistoric beat – even the stars seemed to dance that night to Keith Emerson's power driven staccato rhythms. I was awed. Oh yeah, another thing, I hung out a little in the woodshop and made some fancy chess pieces on the lathe so I could show my parents that, I was like, *doing something* besides hounding the females. You know, you get indoctrinated into bullshitting early. It basically sucked though, but they were paying for it and I had no choice. I did the best I could, being who I was at the time – but that kinda' shit was over for this year, outgrown! This year the party took a turn to the wild side. This year I was gonna show them that they may still be big enough to force me to come here, but they weren't big enough to stop me from doin' what I was gonna do when I got there, which was to smoke pot in the woods all

summer with my friends *and* hound the girls, while my hair grew even longer – let the chips fall where they may. Fuck it. *Buck's Rock Work Camp* – sounds like a socialist prison sentence: "I hereby sentence you to two months of boredom and constraint at Buck's Rock Faggot Farm." (By the way "faggot," unlike *fagola* which of course does – didn't mean *homosexual* to us back then, it meant lame and weak, very uncool, like *douchebag* didn't mean a tool for cleaning vaginas – it meant almost the same as *faggot* only with a bit more of a sarcastic edge, as in a *faggot* you could simply laugh at and dismiss, whereas a *douchebag* needed a punch in the mouth, *get it?*) So much care and concern here. So much personal attention – so much sensitivity. But not today – not when it counted, not when it actually would have meant something, not when it would have been real and not a papier-mâché mask. Today, there were no questions, no discussions, no girls being thrown out too, just us abruptly banished from the pack! Too old to be told what to do I suppose. Ever read *Civilization and Its Discontents*? *Freud?* Jim Jones gave me a copy, which I actually read, cover-to-cover, so I know all about it. Try me. After the first of what was supposed to be eight weeks – expelled without even the slightest pretense of compassion, fairness or understanding, no second chances or warnings, we were out. And it wasn't even my pot. Pot, the *Devil's* weed. Can you believe that? Well, it's true. It was the end of the first week of summer, we were damn near fifteen years old and it was 1972.

I guess the story begins when we all met on day one behind closed doors and by ourselves. We, the four of us – the spoiled near rotten privileged punks in the bunk – we the proud – we the well fed – we the angry – we the discontent. Recognizing each other right away as members of the same rebellious tribe of outcasts, it was getting exciting. The closed door was to the private bunk that we had to ourselves at the far edge of the camp. It stood by itself under the cloak of thick tree limbs near the edge of the forest by the stage. Almost hidden in shadows. The other bunks for the younger kids were attached to each other and shared a common bathroom – ours was menacing and alone. *Perfect*. There were the two guys from

Jersey that came up together, Marko and me. One guy I remember was skinny with long blond hair, don't remember his name, but he was a do*er*. Didn't say much, not many laughs, but he would be there, with the dope and on the road. The other, his friend, was taller, heavier and goofier. You know, the kind whose underwear is always sticking out of the back of his pants and the perpetual dirt underneath the fingernails of his fat, sweaty, soft hands? Good sport though, always smiling. Richard was his name, I think. Usually, summer camps have staff members assigned to the bunks, that is actually living in them with the kids. But in this camp, this so-called "progressive arts camp," kids our age were allowed to sleep by themselves, meaning behind closed doors, meaning just that. ***BOOM!*** Privacy.

It was at the end of this summer that I would turn fifteen, kind of old for a camper, but too young to be a staff member. That *awkward stage* as they call it. That age where I was too big to be easily pushed around by my father at haircut time but too young to take care of myself without him, just old enough to be a big royal pain in the ass, especially to anyone in authority. If I came in contact with you and you didn't talk to me just right, you'd remember me, I'd make sure of it. I'd do something. Curse you out, challenge you, push you to the edge. Maybe I'd just come up to you and punch you dead in the face! *Let's see what happens*, I'd think. *Fuck'm! Fuck'm where they breathe.* I didn't care who you were or who you thought you were. I knew I could get away with it and when I didn't, when I got my ass kicked, well? That was just the breaks. A genuine ball breaking wiseass. I reveled in it. That age when I just plain didn't cut my hair. I smoked Marlboros and Newports, drank beer and loved to fight. About a half a head shorter or more than the next guy, I had what they call *a chip on my shoulder* about a mile wide. My attitude was: *spread the pain*. Had an earring when only pirates and real freaks had them, when it meant something, a suburban street savage. Chipped one of my front teeth – wore a dog chain around my neck and a cutoff, bleached, denim jacket appointed with brass and tin studs shaped like stars over a gray hooded sweatshirt. Used

to roam the streets at night in packs of ten, twenty, thirty or more kids, drink beer and break things – other people's things like windows, luxury car hood ornaments and noses. Had a few of my things broken too along the way. Thought I was a heroic outlaw, a noble, suburban, street-savage, *Kabbo*. I have the photos, newspaper article and the *rap sheet* to prove it. *You dig?* Well, it got awkward all right. But you see, I specialized in *awkward* at the time. So it was just my regular. I was "*shootin' my regular*" to be alone with a bunch of wannabe renegades. Pot smokin' teenage fools. The best. *Dig it?* Ya' see, I'm feelin' it straight from my memory's heart. Kinda' feel like jumpin' somebody right now.

See, summer's always a little extra special for me `cause like I said, it's my birthday at the end of it. August 26, I like that date, it's got a good ring to it. August, Augustus, Asskicker, Augustus Asskicker, Augustus Asskicker the First. Sounds about right. I was fourteen, we were all just fourteen – all four of us wannabes – me, the two other guys who were friends from home and the fourth mysterious guy, Marko Limn. He said he was from Boston. I'm a *New Yorker*. Well, a born in Philadelphia, lived in Brooklyn then moved to the suburbs when I was ten New Yorker. I'm a New Yorker. I say he was *mysterious* because he was a little too cool, a little too mature, a little too measured and his pot smoked a little too strong. Yeah he was cool all right, dancing the Mick Jagger strut to *Sympathy For The Devil*, coolin'. He had it down, the strut, the attitude, the rap. "*Yo Kabz*," he would call out to me with stoned, lazy, sarcastic enthusiasm, "*Yo Kabzman, light us up a doob...*" – half a command, half an invitation. If I wasn't so psyched-up about getting high I mighta' cracked him just for usin' that tone with me. Oh well, I admit he *was* kinda' cool, he even had an Omega shirt. Remember the Mick's Omega shirt, top hat and scarf? Bad, scary bad, Satan incarnate on stage and I really dug it. Altamont. Bikers, drugs, killers, hippies and musicians. "*Rape… murder.. it's just a shot a way…*" Feral darkness. Still do. He was a little older looking than the rest of us, mighta' even been fifteen already, but his bullshit was sure a helluva' lot better. Even the counselors took him more

seriously than they did us. So, it seemed like it was his lead to follow. What the hell kinda' name was *Marko* anyway? Marko Limn, Marko Polo, Marko Fucko. Ol' Marko Fucko was supposed to be our *Abbie Hoffman* contact. He said he was friends with Abbie's wife Anita and knew their address in Boston where we were supposed to find refuge and be indoctrinated as foot soldiers in the second American Revolution. *Yippie!* Said he was gonna call her after we left to let them know we were coming. Truth is? He might have, I'll never know. The Marko connection. We said we were ready. Correction, the Marko *bullshit* connection. Felt like it never happened – I don't remember – we were bullshit too, *that* I do remember. Marko had that bushy black hair, cold blue eyes and that pale white skin along with a little extra body fat that gave him that something to look at type of appearance. "*Tommy can you hear me?...*" His voice though, was a little bit squeakier and higher than looked right coming out of a body that big and round. A metaphysical clue that all was not as it seemed, or should have been with this *phony-fat-fuck.*

So, with the old graffiti scarred bunk door closed and the window shutters shut tight, we looked into each other's faces and cautiously, wordlessly, revealed our stashes. *Stashes*, what a cool word. It brings back so much memory. Memory of time, of place, of secrecy, of youth. Memory of the hidden, the forbidden, the precious. Secret agents painted on black-light posters, all of us, spies for the underground. These were our credentials. Memory of the essential element that separated the *us* from the *them* – the fundamental component of our youthful rebellion, the drugs – better than a switchblade or a German Luger – better than *007* and *Hugh Hefner* – the deadly, evil, forbidden narcotics. Oh, how I loved it. The names we had, the codes we enjoyed – *somethin' for the head*, the *Weed*, *Erb*, *Skunk*, *Dope*, the *Get High*, the *Shit*, the *Good Shit*, the *Really Great Shit*, the *Holy Shit*. *You got anything for the head? I got 'ludes. Rorer's? 7-14s m'man - how much you lookin' to score? All you got, baby…* And *stashes* of coarse, because we needed to keep it hidden, *stashed* sometimes quick. The ol' key to the "*mystic*

crystal revelation." Not only the element itself, but all the accompanying paraphernalia: the rolling-papers of different flavors, colors, and sizes, their names, Mr. Natural, Zig-Zag, Big Bamboo (distinct from regular Bamboo, a half inch shorter a sheet, what the point was we never knew), the customized steel pipes with the interlocking chambers and stems used to resonate the *buds* in the thick black, sticky, tar of THC left by the smoke, and change their shape and design for creative customization, the rolling machine, all the assorted contraptions, all precious elements of the glorious stash – the aluminum foil, glass tubes, lighters and the bong. "Bong hits," don't ask, and the skill of rolling a good joint, not too tight, not too loose, neat and clean, just exactly right. I kept my *stash* in an old, wooden microscope case saved from my chemistry set days. It was all so cool, the whole thing from *copping* to *stashing* and of course to smoking, like a secretive and hedonistic religious ritual. Cool, way cool. *Back to Eden*. Primitive. I loved it. And I hadn't even really gotten high. I mean the stuff hadn't worked its magic on me yet – not for lack of trying, I'd smoked plenty up to then, the school year before, but it hadn't taken effect. I never actually felt anything. No "buzz." Nothing aside a sore throat from coughing. Quietly, I suspected it was mostly hype, Emperor's New Clothes-style, a funky fairytale. But it was still exciting, the thought that something cool *might* happen if you smoked it; I might *trip-out* and see rainbows in space and fire-dragons rode by naked woman-warriors to *Tarkus*. Maybe I'd see G-d, or angels. Anyway, it was definitely illegal, and that made it exciting enough. We were revolutionary rebels just by having it. That was for certain. So there we stood in the semi darkness of the hermetically sealed chamber that was our bunk, each of us betting that the others were *cool*. *Is he cool? Are they cool? Is it cool? He got anything for the head? Weed? Black Beauties? Window Pane? Blotter?* Cool. I myself hadn't brought any (wasn't that cool yet) but was hoping that others would and was glad, more than glad discovering they did. *Delighted* and *excited* are probably the best words. The two boys from Jersey had at least an ounce each and I think Marko brought up almost an ounce and a half of his own. That was gonna be plenty! Me? Well, at least I was *cool*. I would

smoke with them and certainly not rat on anybody. We were gonna "party" – and maybe I would actually even get "high." As a matter of fact, we did, and right away. It was day one. Our parents had no sooner dropped us off up there in the "*stoned soul picnic*" mountains of the New Milford *Hippieland* than there we were, squarin' off to each other behind the closed cabin doors. You could practically see the untempered joy of our hearts leap across the room once it was clear that we were all *cool*, that we were gonna spend the summer together in this bunk, at this camp, *getting high*. Maybe even get laid too. Who knows? Anything might happen. This was definitely gonna be great! *Definitely!*

"*Please allow me to introduce myself − I'm a man of wealth and taste...* " (Mick Jagger, Keith Richards)

All I can remember about the first buzz is lying magnetized to this huge, warm, smooth boulder of stone. I even think the rock had a name, *Fuffy,* or some shit. The girls named it. That's what girls do – give things girly names like *Fuffy,* as in a pajama-wearing bunny rabbit instead of a cold, hard, ancient, mass of granite. We didn't mind, it was good strategy we thought, humor them when possible, we let you name the rocks – you let us feel you up, *deal?* It was a huge boulder, about the size of a Volkswagen minibus resting half-buried, deep in the earth beneath the shadows of the cool, quiet, dark forest. The spot was all of about a quick two minute walk from the back of the stage into Ernst Bulova's glorious Connecticut countryside, but that was far enough to give the teenagers a sense of privacy and ownership. Secluded in nature, Fuffy the rock was the great stone sanctuary we would escape to, to be ourselves and to laugh, to curse, flirt, spit and complain, punctuating it all with thick clouds of white hot smoke. Cigarettes mostly, but today it was for a taste of Magic Motion, motion and stillness playing together all at once. It's all relative anyway said the great professor, *right?* Anyhow, today, that day, with the boys in the bunk and a few of the girls too, I straddled Fuffy and inhaled. Drawing in deeply with my

lips purposely pressed tightly to the hot steel stem of the bowl, I wiped the saliva off with my hands and shirt and endured the forceful expansion of hot smoke into my young lungs. Once it's in you gota' hold it in – if you let yourself cough, you're dead. If you let go too soon by coughing it's really gonna hurt. Your throat, your lungs, your eyes, everything – not to mention you look really bad too – weak, pussy, eyes waterin' and snot flyin' out of your nose, turnin' red, gaggin', wretchin'. Coughing uncontrollably is not sexy, manly or cool. It's weak, like I said – pathetic. Not a pretty sight – especially not in front of the chicks. Naturally. So don't do it, hold on and hold it in at any cost, even if it meant passin' out which it almost did. It's not easy. Feels like a hot grenade exploding all of a sudden in your chest. Sometimes you don't make it. It's all part of it. Dying, getting busted, getting stoned – a *right of passage*. Then, as hoped, on a great stone under the towering trees and for the first long awaited time, here it was, the creeping sensation of fullness, and stillness, of delicious warmth and contentment, an unmatched chemical comfort that is called a *high*. It was subtle, barely noticeable at first. Pass the bowl; take a hit, repeat, a spontaneous giggle, a growing ease and sudden joy. You catch your friend's eye, you both know it's happening. Slowly, deliberately, you let out the smoke. The longer you wait and the more smoke you eventually let out, the bigger a hit you took so the cooler you look. *Lee Van Cleef* tokin' on the *weed*. You laugh at him, he laughs at you, witness an *ear-to-ear* conspiratorial grin. You try to make each other break into fits of laughter so the other guy erupts in a coughing fit and so cause further pain and embarrassment, hence more laughter. Funny faces look ten times funnier under pressure not to laugh – meanness and affection at the same time. It's great, really, really great. You had to be there. An emanation. An easy lightness, a soft inner glow spreading inside you like a warm bubble filling you up – the merging of opposites – weightiness, I recline. Gazing upwards from the supporting surface of the immense stone I notice the warmth of the rays of the sun as they gently absorb my skin. There is no need to move because I am perfectly comfortable as I am. I realize, laughingly, it doesn't matter after all. I laugh inward this time. I hear

the life affirming song of a single bird set apart from the rest of the forest chorus. I see the outline of each leaf pressed against the warm and deep blue summer sky. I am part of it all and clearly belong here. I belong to the stone. I'm hidden in the stone. I belong in the forest, to the trees. My weight is so great, my body so still, I no longer sense where it is that I begin and where the stone ends. I feel we are one. I am okay here. Everything is okay here. For maybe the very first time, truly and completely okay here. Wasted, stoned, buzzed, finally. Richard, one of the Jersey boys nudges me, he is trying to pass the bowl, I smoke more or don't smoke more, feeling a continuing awareness of gravity, of timelessness, of stillness, of perfectly contented being and joy, now a part of everything. No more, no less. That's what good drugs are, instant spirituality through Mother Nature. Relief. Like with everything else though, you just have to pay the bill, whatever it is. In nature, I find, there is no give without take, so you better watch out. Anyway, do you remember Dear Prudence? "*The sun is up, the sky is blue, it's beautiful, and so are you…*" Shit, how beautiful. No wonder it was illegal, it was so fuck'n good. Puritan *douchebags* poisoned pleasure here in the Americas. The girls are laughing too now, they're having a real party – smoking cigarettes and chewing gum at the same time as they laugh hysterically at their private jokes probably about us. We didn't mind, happy to at least have their attention. I smell the flavor of the gum; it's a very strong, rich and sweet sugary smell. Maybe grape. You know, the kind that's so sweet only teenage girls and small children can tolerate it – together an odd mixture blending with the smell of burning tobacco, forest and pot smoke. You get a very dry mouth from smoking dope, especially if you wash it down with cigarette smoke so gum comes in handy. They call it *cotton mouth* – very black – very cool – right to the point. I hear them popping and snapping with their tongues as they exhale the smoke, giggle and talk. It all merges, the sounds, the feelings, the warmth of the rock, the cool shade of the trees, the tricks of golden sunlight dancing on the broken, brown-gray bark of fallen limbs, the summer, the friends, the Rolling Stones, everything – everything is everything – separate and apart and together as one. I can't move

and I don't have to – it's so pleasant – so very pleasant. I'm laughing again, this time out loud and at nothing. The laughter spreads. I can barely react to the girls who are now just part of the background to the forest's sounds, the air and light. That's how stoned I am. Fourteen years old, living life in the constant fevered craving of a sex dazed fantasy and I can hardly respond to these barefoot, giggling, cute, young and stoned forest nymphs. Maybe that's what got them so mad, *stoned* trumped *horny* for the moment. *Hell hath no fury like a cavorting clique...*

So anyway, back to the road that fateless free morning in the Connecticut predawn, there we were, the three of us, standing, looking, wondering, wandering, the three of us, hitchin' down the road. For some never explained reason, for some un-understood phenomenon, ol' Marko Fucko, bunk member and pot smoker extraordinaire never got the boot. We were too brotherly to complain about this aspect of the shaft we were receiving, the rules so selectively enforced, especially at me and not him, but it still bothered me a bit. It wasn't right. We weren't right, they weren't right and he wasn't right. Nobody was. Marko conned even the ol' gyrating, floating, phantom-fuck, shrink, the original Doctor No-It-All himself into letting him stay. Guru, refugee, bullshit jerk. To the best bull-shitter go the spoils, I guess. Bought off our resentment with that *con-job* story about Abbie Hoffman's wife's phone number. Yeah *right!* He probably got laid that summer too – laid and high, in our bunk which he probably had to himself and turned into his own private, country, pleasure palace. Marko *Full-o'-shitto*. Oh well, good for him, having whatever he had or didn't have, spending the rest of summer under the *Buck's Rock* thumb, but we got to feel free for a few fleeting moments, under no one's thumb. Really, really free, and the feeling would last, at least the memory of it, for a long, long time.

"...river's deep, gate is wide – break on through to the other side, break on through, break on through, break, break, break, break – yeah!" (Jim Morrison)

Tripping down the tree-lined hill under cover of sacred darkness ("…*darkness, darkness, long and lonesome...*") before dawn we made exit. We left the pot there, ditched it, surrendered it. Whatever. Probably gave it to guess who, I don't really remember. I do recall deciding as a group that it was too risky to be *carrying* while we were odysseying. Besides, there was plenty more where we were going, the *Yippies* would give everyone free weed as a reward for our courage. *Right?* Of course. Sex, drugs and rock'n roll on top *of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness* was the new battle cry and our credo. The private dirt road that led from the campgrounds to the public highway was as steep as it was long. About a half mile I'd say – smelled like horses and trees – occasionally skunk. I'm reminded a little bit of a stoned scene, like from the *Wizard of Oz.* Remember that joy? When they took off? That heady optimism and release? That's what it was sort of like as the stars faded to light. That Scarecrow strut, the way he sort of off balancedly hops onto one foot, catches himself in stride then locks arms with *Dorothy* and the *Tin Man*, that initial *ooomph?* That, take a beat, then leap to joy kind of strut? Well, that's how prospects lay before us. *Freedom.* Freedom from our parents and their middle-class ways – freedom from fear – freedom from pressure – freedom from school – freedom from having to grow up – freedom from having to *make something* out of myself – freedom from FUCKYOU – freedom from all that. Freedom see, just plain freedom, freedom from free. You know, like the kind they fought the first *Revolutionary War* about. Remember the Rascals? *People gota' be Free?* The *inalienable* right to *the pursuit of happiness?* Well, *we the people* were the people they were singin' about on that fine summer morning in early July, off to pursue our inalienable rights. "Inalienable" – cool word, *right?* It means you can't *fuck* with it. *Inalienable*. We would build ourselves up again from practically scratch – out would grow our hair – gone would be our fears. Abbie would teach us fine – forget refugee Ernst – this was our mentor. I mean anything could happen – we could sleep in alleys if we had to – eat whatever people gave us or steal – get dirty and stay that way and look cool all the time. Stay out all night! There might actually be a real revolution! Bombs could go

off! Fighting in the streets! *OFF THE PIG!!!* We were gonna be rugged, the rugged and committed young revolutionaries worthy of praise, respect and best of all lots of easy, free hippie pussy. Lots. Couldn't wait for it to start. "*We're not gonna take it*..." Justice was on our side. Persecuted for pot. It was gonna be great! Grown women would joyfully show you their tits! It was political! And sexy too! You'll see! And I'll be in the center of it all! *Young* you may say, yeah sure young, with all of it to look forward to! I was gonna be the new *Che' Guevara*, the next *Jerry Rubin* and today's *Paul Revere! "One if by land - two if by sea.. and I..*" tokin' *doobs* on both shores! *Yahoo!!!!* This was still "the dawning of the *Age of Aquarius*" and in the *Age of Aquarius* the drugs are strong, the music's fine and the girls say "yes" all the time! You can wear a black beret over a colored headband and carry a toy gun, have your picture taken and broadcast on the nightly news – paint "FUCK" on your forehead and have it mean something smart – burn a draft card and levitate the Pentagon! Orgies! *Strike!* See, it all happens, Lucy's in the sky and the diamonds are the notes to the siren's sweet song. Get the picture? It was an easy ride with a motorcycle across time, space and cultural bounds. Sew a flag to the back of your dungarees upside down! Reject racism, end the war, be better than our parents! Self-righteousness as pop art. I can go where I wanna go! Wherever I wanna go. Anything can happen when you're free. Don't have to do nothin'. I can feel it now – I can feel that low, slow rising up of the bubbling base beat, that fine, free, hippy black-chick with the buck skin fringe cry out: "*When the moon, is in the seventh house.*" *Whoa!* Hold on honey, I'm comin'. I'll be right there. Just save a spot in the circle for me! The *seventh house!* Yeah! Whatever the fuck that was. The euphoric exhilaration of a taste, a sense of a taste of true adventure, of true and absolute freedom, fleeting though it may have been, has never been lost. Its flavor rivaled, even surpassed the melting into the stone. Truly it did. On our way now, all we hada' do was rise to the occasion. We just about had that brass ring in hand and it was almost like Heaven.

Heaven, yeah, beyond the pearly gates, or as we know it, *olam ha ba*, the world to come. Everything's perfect there, everything is excellent, everything is everything, you don't even need weed, and all the cool people are waiting: Sergeant Pepper, Marshall McLuhan, Instant Karma, Chubby Checker, Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, Mr. Jimmy, Dr. Tim, Janis, Grace, Mama Cass and the rest of the Hell's Angels, happy-hippy-gang I so yearned to join. In Heaven we all ride perfectly tuned Harley Davidsons to the live, long, electric version of Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile*. In fact, that's what you hear, the whole damn *Electric Lady Land* album over and over followed by *Tommy, Déjà vu* and the *White Album*. And when you get tired of that it's Dylan, Traffic, the Doors, the Who and the Grateful *goddamn* Dead. The great DJ in the sky always knows exactly what you wanna hear. He knows it before you know it. That's what makes Him so great. It's like a good acid trip all the time. Accelerate the hand grip's atomic throttle and feel the power surge blast out from under you, lifting you, pulling you and rocketing you across the stellar rainbows of infinite light bending space. I'm a supersonic ghost. *Whata'* rush! Can you dig it? *Check me!* I ride the crests of astral waves through tunnels of white light, true space and lost time. I have location but no dimension. I sail warm oceans. I navigate by starlight, coasting on a vast sea of electromagnetic moon currents. Past, present and future unfold and combine before me into an eternal *now*. I hear the sound of one hand clapping. It sounds like *om*. I join in. I open up to forever. Whatever. We pass the *Creator* on an island in the firmament, it's a nova, He's hitchhiking and doesn't mind that we don't pick him up. He just smiles lovingly and blows pulsating, ultra-violet; smoke rings at us as we glide along. It smells like sweet, grape gum and fresh tobacco fire. We don't even have to pray – it's all cool – really, it is – that's what Heaven is – everything's cool. We pick up the speed a little to impress Him. It's okay. We're His little children and allowed to have fun. Pleasure's okay again. We can even be bad if we want to. Anything, really. He's like a big Jerry Garcia Teddy bear with Moses, staff in hand by His side. The Big Mo' doesn't smile though, just looms real large with those big stone tablets cradled in his

outstretched arms. The Lord's enforcer behind *Foster Grants*, careful what you bow to, to him *Golden Calves* still ain't too cool but now you know you don't need'm, never did – *Moshe' rabeinu'* – Moses our teacher, the righteous liberator and lawgiver. It's cool. We know what *forever* is, how it smells and what it tastes like. Anyway, in Heaven you don't have to wait on line to be free. You just flow along effortlessly like a particle of light waving through the eternal cycles of motionless time. Yes sir, effortlessly and forever, unlimited joy, that's why they call it *Heaven*.

All right now, ("... *baby it's all right now.*") flyin' through our dreams, coppin' rides and schemin' schemes. At midday we took a break from hitchin' to buy sandwiches. Then back to the road where we made more distance. The bright and sunny midsummer afternoon offered plenty of chances for some decent rides. We got'm and took'm, mostly from blue collar farmer types in the backs of their battered, old pickup trucks tattooed with VFW, MIA and American flag decals. Maybe they wanted to come along with us a little bit. They had to know we were running away. Very cool. By late afternoon we made it all the way to Massachusetts, crossed the line to the next state, big time. Proclamating and gloating, boasting and singing we hitchhiked along, ignoring the fact that we had no plan and the fact that we had very little in the way of the tools necessary to improvise a plan. Needing plans, we told ourselves was what we left behind – that's what it's all about anyway, not having to have plans. Freedom. Can't you hear *Jesse Collin Young's* urgent plea, "*c'mon people now – smile on your brother – everybody get together – try'n love one another right now...*"*? Dig?* Well, that's what it was like for a few grand moments out on the open road in hot July, the brothers were together an' lovin' every minute of the time they were free. Free and together, out there, yes – laughing and cursing at the rides that wouldn't pick us up, kicking stones at them as we flicked our still lit butts into the dry summer grass, whatever happened felt right. It was a gas, like *Jumpin' Jack Flash*. No one could stop us but ourselves, and then just as freedom began to seem really real, not a *someday* but a *right now*, not a movie but a reality,

the gears began to slip, a slow but steady downshift. Fourth to third. After about twelve hours of heady, boisterous freedom on the road, by late afternoon we grew quiet. We got tired. The temperature dropped, just a little but enough to notice. Hunger set in. Wavering. We looked back, at first casually; just to see how far we'd come, but after the first quick glance, a short time later, maybe after the next ride we looked back again – and then again, each time taking longer to turn back around to face forward, doubt formed, now the rides were fewer, longer stretches between them, not all at once but once it started, gradually like a creeping infection, it never stopped, we looked back again, *never turn back*, but we did, and when you do it once, without a Marko Limn or an Abbie Hoffman to lead or non-lead, whatever they liked to call it, you keep on doin' it. Third to second. By the time late afternoon turned to early evening something very warm cooled very down, something inside, the spirit of '72. As it grew dim and the reality of being alone on the thruway all night with no place to sleep and nothing to eat hit us, our middle-class, adolescent hearts paled. Survival instincts kicked in over-riding fantasy and dreams. Richard said, "*man, it's getting dark,*" and the other guy warned, "*watch the trucks!*" Spontaneous smiles and excited glances were replaced by forced fake smiles but the shine in the eyes was gone. We were almost outa' cigarettes. I couldn't put my finger on it but I knew, seemed we all three knew, it was happening and it couldn't be stopped. Threatening clouds of rumbling uncertainty gathered above our heads, it might rain, slowly and steadily weighing down on us, eroding our once unquestioned confidence. I needed another sandwich. Second to first. Darkness descended on us like a veil of nocturnal gloom, signaling the fading of our psychedelic, wild and vivid, bright and hopeful teenage dreams. The questions about plans so casually dismissed when dancing under the sweet summer sunshine and early morning stars now seemed like much more real and serious concerns as night's deep wings slowly embraced us. Failure loomed. Just exactly where were we gonna go? What were we gonna do? Where were we gonna crash tonight? Where was that sandwich? Moreover, who was gonna take responsibility for us and tell us what to do? Where was Marko

when we really needed him? Striking back at Ernst wasn't enough we now saw. We'd done that. He had to face our parents when they got up there and tell them he didn't know where their kids were – *payback* you duplicitous old refugee coot – he'd have some explaining to do. Even with that petty triumph it all started to seem too very dangerous and threatening, fantasy gave way to the reality of being alone on the six lane interstate in the dark, just a little too overwhelming for young boys never away from the protective arms of grownups before. Fear replaced doubt. We may have jumped the gun here. The music stopped. Time dragged to a halt. Now, even the forced smiles were gone. No more energy for that, all our energy consumed by the trepidation of surviving on foot along the turnpike at night. I think that each of us felt that the others were also too chicken to go on, but nobody had the courage to say it out loud, or to figure out how to get out of it; how to gracefully reconcile our early morning bravado with our early evening timidity. Nobody said anything. First to neutral. There we stood on the highway's soft shoulder, watching the last rays of sun slowly vanish, practically paralyzed with indecision and anxiety, mesmerized by the surreal dance our shadows played on the slick New England blacktop. They would expand eerily forward in the bath of the passing headlight's glare, bend slowly inward and towards us, then quickly contract to disappear. Once gone and after a short pause, they began again. The pattern repeated itself like a skipping record as we watched in hapless, helpless silence. Stuck in a loop going nowhere. Defeated. Again, it was unanimous. Between the three of us we had about six dollars `cause you see in the mystic, crystal revelation of the *Age of Aquarius* you don't need no stinkin' money. Needing money was another thing we thought we left behind. As moonlight fell where the distant sun once shone and the seventy mile an hour wind blasts from the speeding semis further chilled our tender spirits – their air horns blowing alarms like the clarion calls of surrender to our young ears, *you're in over your heads – you're in way over your heads* – we quietly hoped for a rescue. Our dreams of glory, of revolution, of *Jane Fonda* smiling approval and lovingly showing us her tits as we lit our *Molotovs*, of forever being able to escape, collapsed into the

rote and unavoidable schemes of the conformist's existence already prescribed for us. The thing you love that kills you. Ordinariness. Like morning regularity. Well, morning regularity doesn't exactly kill you dead, but you get the idea, the rote and mundane – life's exuberant energy crushed by stifling worry, worry about SATs, GNPs, the IRS, EKGs and the DMZ – the three-letter freak out – condemned to conformity, killing your spirit. No way to escape the clock's ticking except to go, to be free, a fugitive from time. How will I ever afford a mortgage? What will I be when I grow up? Oh no! Interest rates are rising! Meeting other people's expectations, whoever asked us what *we* wanted? Inflation, stagnation, the bills you have to pay. *Shit no*. Not for me. Kids, wife, private school tuition, braces for their teeth! Divorce, solitude, aging, loneliness and finally, death. *Oh no!* Isn't there anything else? Schemes laid out for us like the goofy contrived drawings of an amusement park guest map, no surprises, nothing creative, nothing authentic, nothing real, make-believe adventure, like a funhouse. Bullshit. Too inexperienced to break free and get away we *leapt before we looked,* as they say – too ordinary after all. We wanted to go home to the safety of *Mom and Dad*. Shame was the cost. Surrender of our dreams was the ticket's price to pay. *Postponed* I told myself. They'd have to wait, or I'd just have to get used to living without them, the dreams, like our parents had and their parents' before them did. Well, by the way, it wasn't totally true, true enough for my first and second generation parents, but not my immigrant grand and great-great-grandparents, they were pretty goddamn rugged and brave, they stayed on the highway following their dreams across continents and the ocean to make'm real, but what did I know at the time? I wasn't them, they actually had what I pretended to and wished for, the courage to be free, in place, I made excuses.

Near about then when all these thoughts metastasized into an anxiety bordering on panic, thinking to ourselves, *how the hell are we gonna get out of this mess?* Soon enough along a rescue came – a rolling blue and white gas-guzzling knight had been sent for the runaways who were pretty easy to spot, not many other cliques of

cavorting teenagers hitch-hiking on the Massachusetts Turnpike that night. A rescue in the form of a big ol' *smoky the bear* type state trooper in his big ol' *smoky the bear* type state trooper-mobile. The staticy voice of the police-car radio corrupted the softly humming wind of the warm highway night, highlighting our collapse, its silent lights spinning red and white alerts assuring us that the revolution was aborted, you felt it in the gravel shifting under foot as the tires guided the vehicle along side the *pot-smoking-in-the-woods-with-the-girls* rebels. Reverse. Once he came to a full stop we jumped, wordlessly, practically falling over each other to get in, he didn't even have to get out of that car, as if a limo had been sent to pick us up from a field trip out on the edge. The heroes were retiring. Jane Fonda put away her tits. Gone was the dream, gone were the rugged radicals, evaporated with the fading sun of the summer sky. Maybe catch we'd up with Abbie another time, at least I might, but for sure the hippy girl in the tie-dyed fringe wouldn't wait. We blew that.

The Lindell-Dorfmans, great-great immigrant grand folks, c. 1900, working the American dream.

Back at the barracks, humiliation on top of defeat, if we hadn't felt small already they were helping out by rubbing it in, a couple of amused troopers commented on the *FBI's least wanted fugitives* their co-cop brought in. Sitting there in the squad room, or whatever it was, too ashamed to look at each other, I don't remember ever having made eye contact, or any other contact with either of these two boys again. What went wrong? How did our adventure that started out so nobly defiant end in such ignominious failure? We weren't actually caught, or really defeated, no, we gave up, surrendered, without even a fight! Not even a full night out. I mean, if we had made it at least to Boston, made it at least to the next day, slept in the weeds one night, it woulda' been cool. But not even that! Sold out! Sold for the price of a sandwich and a free ride home, and I'm not even sure about the sandwich part – nothing to show, *nada*, nothing but a cheap, embarrassing story to tell. All we could do now was just sit there, hungry and humbled waiting for our parents to pick our helpless asses up. Yeah, we put them through something all right, a disappointment followed by a fright. Old Ernst must have felt something like we did being told to *get out now*. But that was never more than a starting point, a bonus. The real point was something else. We were out for a much bigger score. *Freedom*. What made this whole fiasco so memorable was that feeling. That free moment. That moment emerging from the darkness, striding down the dirt-country road when I broke loose and claimed total power and control over my life. *This* I thought, was gonna be *mine* – my own personal gift from Above. *I'm gonna do what I want to do* I told myself *and no one can tell me a thing* – like a young bird out of its nest soaring above it all on its first flight, I felt it. Like the rush you feel the first time you step too hard on a gas pedal and feel the motor take off, lunging abruptly and powerfully forward almost out of control, right on the edge, or like when you inhale your first drag on a cigarette without choking and willfully say something rude and out of line to an authority and get away with it – *that* was a feeling. The rush itself may go away but the memory doesn't. That was a great moment. Way better than following a strike with a spare or running a whole rack on the pool table. They're cool too but not

even close. They're what you end up settling for; cash and prizes, a new car, a built-in swimming pool, a *dream vacation*, putting the kids through college, a comfortable retirement. Big *fuck'n* deal! That's what I was afraid of. That's what we were running away from, pathetic substitutes for a real life. Che' Guevara had it right – so did Tim Leary and so did Abbie Hoffman, but really who had their balls? We sure didn't. Scarier than that though, scarier than what we were running from was something else. What must have been so frightening wasn't the hint of hunger or even the fierce dark winds of the tractor-trailers booming by us that froze our tender, teenage, chicken hearts, but the idea that we could really be free if we decided to be – free to take responsibility for ourselves – to lay it on the line and see what we were really made of without our parents as excuses for holding back. Free to take our chances and let the chips fall where they may – that it was up to us, only us. The time just wasn't right, for some it never is, so freedom doesn't happen, they trade it for mortgages and college tuition, they go bowling, clearly, but for me? Well, *maybe it would happen later*, I considered while sitting there in shame, or *maybe even right now*. The choice was always ours and we were on its cusp. The question was, could we handle it? The answer was *no*, we weren't ready. Not then, maybe not even now, but definitely not *never*. You don't know until you go, no other way to find out. That time? We called our own bluffs, answering the challenge on the road with a nod to fear, a bow to conformity. Morning regularity. Fell over each other to get into the back of the police car. We turned out to be cut from the same cloth as those fearful shits who ratted on us to Ernst. That's what really happened to the three rebellious boys who ran away from camp to be free on that cool, promising dawn in July of '72. They tried to, and for a few, brief, memorable hours seemed to be succeeding, leaving a lasting impression, but in the end they couldn't run away from themselves, they forgot to stash their *subterranean homesick* leashes along with the marijuana back at the camp before taking off. Still, like on Fuffy, I remember the moment, that first, true, sweet taste. Looking back from here now to there then, it's clear, our choice that night on the road to revolution was

just a simple expression of the same fear that's tamed men's souls since the beginning – the fear that holds us back and asks: *how can I live the life I want to live? How much time do I have? To whom must I answer? Who will lead me if I follow? Where will we go? What does it cost me to just let go and see? What does it cost me not to?* Courage finds the answers, or, rather, I'd say courage is not knowing the answers but going ahead anyway, like we did that morning. That's faith. That was cool. I was too young and unsure to venture any further along the dark highway that frightful, fateful night at almost fifteen. I'm still working on it today, as I write and as I speak. This is the threshold to cross; the great divide to conquer – the bridge that spans what is from what might be. Here I hold now, here I stand, reflecting forward and gathering courage – nurturing faith – nurturing courage. Moment only though it was, it was the freest I ever had.

Kabbo `74

"I don't need to fight – to prove I'm right – I don't need to be forgiven…" (Peter Townsend)

I told the cops I *hated him*. What the hell else would a cornered and angry sixteen-year-old say? And it was true so that's why I said it. I felt no need to hide my motives, especially since they asked. *"Honesty's the best policy,"* they say, turns out though that's really the first big lie they teach you. Only naturally `cause it's a lie they can't tell you it's a lie so they gota' make it sound like it's true. You gota' find out what a lie it is on your own. They call that process "growing up." That's a real fun trip by the way. It takes a while to get there but most of us do and when you do, after your heart gets broken a couple of times, knocked down, busted up, dreams turned to ash once or twice and come back alive again, when you get to the point of findin' out it's all mostly bullshit, when you end up as full of it as every body else, then you become what we call an "adult." Full circle, nice an' cozy, just another snug bug in the rug hopin' not to get stepped on too hard too soon. Anyway, before all that, before figuring out that getting real meant getting fake I gave'm the truth when one of them asked me why I did it. He kinda' pulled me over to the side and you know, real *man to man* like asked me why we drove over there and did the foul deed. It seemed like he was being sincere, you know, sort of concerned older brother type of talk, the neighborhood cop on the corner so I told him the truth: *I hated the guy*. I hated his guts. I hated his shadow. Heavy envy `cause he rubbed it in. Sherry "wasn't pretty"? Okay. Right. Now you die. Everything was so easy for him; parents, family, home, money. I spit on the thought of his ancestors. I said it and I meant it too but I didn't know they were gonna print it. Had I? I woulda' probably tried to come up with something a little more philosophical like "it's a cruel world and I'm only a small, young, mostly innocent part of it," or some attempt at sounding sympathetic or clever, something to that effect. Anyway, the headline read "*Vandals Attack Homes, Two*

Youths Are Arrested" and the six paragraph article in the next day's Long Island newspaper *Newsday* concluded with my personal confession: "One police source said Kabakoff had told the police he 'hates Dave.'" *Hate,* whata' ugly and sick thing to say. Well, I said it and now had to live with it. I felt famous and notorious, made the paper, big man, *toughguy*, dangerous, and sounded insane, not honest or philosophical and certainly not cute or clever. Oh well, water under the bridge. And my parents? Well, they musta' been somewhat deeply ashamed and embarrassed, especially my father, him bein' a doctor an all, well, an *optometrist* anyway and real concerned about his professional reputation, at least with strangers that is. But I was in much too much pain to care about any of that so didn't have much sympathy for them or anybody else except myself at the time. That's another thing I'm still working on. Talk about *Sympathy for the Devil*, that shoe really fits. And about Dave, *why?* Why did I hate him so much? Well, for one thing was he was richer than me and flaunted it, (not that I gave a shit about material things for their own sakes but for their utilitarian and symbolic value felt a jab of resentment) and another thing was, the real reason was `cause he insulted my girlfriend. That's what I heard anyway and it was probably true, so that's why I came up with the drunken idea at the diner that night to go to his house and practice a little of the fine art of midnight vandalism – a terror call. We musta' all watched *A Clockwork Orange* a few too many times back in those days and it went a little to our heads – fancied ourselves contemporary "Droogs" *a la* good `ol Stanley Kubrick *via* Anthony Burgess. Bored, drunken, resentful, suburban delinquents – nothing new. We were out drinking and carousing that night in Scar's car, it musta' been well after midnight when we decided to head to the diner for our usual late, late night breakfast feasts before heading home: eggs, sausage, pancakes, homefries, toast, coffee, orange juice, salt, pepper, syrup, butter, the works. Our routine was to go out early, maybe seven, seven thirty, get the beer, booze and drugs, go over one of our houses, tank up to some tunes then go out around eleven. Going out meant bar hoppin', cruisin' the streets and trouble making. Vintage Americana like *American Graffiti* only not as

sweet or pretty. We weren't the toughest bunch of guys in Rockville Center and Rockville Center isn't exactly Red Hook, Brooklyn or Paterson, New Jersey, not by far, but we were up there on the list of kids that decent parents wouldn't let into their homes which met a reasonable expectation for the styles and reps we had in mind for ourselves compensating for feeling like mediocre nobodies otherwise and anything else other kids strived for wasn't worth the effort. Did I really need to be all-county wrestler or another year-book art-editor like my dad? He got his lunch money taken by Italian, roughneck, Borough Park kids in the forties. Me? I took other kid's shit, that was enough, better than an OD or Esq. or even an MD. Better than morning regularity, especially that. No, we weren't frat-boys or jocks and surely not scholars or artists, rather somewhere in between *party-guy burnouts* and misdemeanor level criminal types. Easy stuff. And we could upgrade any time. At least I felt I could and under just the right circumstances very likely would. I was probably the wildest in this particular group, that is halfway to homicidal and most likely to start a fight and have to be rescued by the others or be taken away in handcuffs on any given night out – and it happened plenty. Fights, fires, tear gas canisters goin' off, all sorts of mischievous ballyhoo – *Teenage Wasteland*. Like the time a year before, a night trip out to an apartment party in Patchogue or Sayville or one of those Suffolk County white-trash-dive towns, when as soon as we got there I had a bad feeling, so first minute alone put a big carving knife from a kitchen drawer in my boot (as was my practice and general rule of thumb in those festive occasions*, parties*). Sure as shit, later that evening a big, fat, longhaired, belching hyena of an idiot wearing a cutoff denim jacket over a plumbing supply store tee-shirt, taller and much heavier than me started up, said like, I was looking at his skinny, drug addict, missing toothed, girlfriend. Sure. I just can't resist the cheap, bleached blond look with the black roots showing and too much blue eyeliner, `specially with a *Harley Davidson* tee shirt, skull and cross bone earrings and jailhouse tattoos on her hands – loved those bitten down fingernails with the cracked cherry-red nail polish too. Uh-huh, just my type, a real Penthouse trailer-park playmate of the year.

Yeah right! Not quite, I was never that drunk. Not back then anyway, I was a *Maryanne* from *Gilligan's Island* type from way back; from even before knowing what pussy really was and stayed that way when I found out – especially after finding out. He was just lookin' for an excuse to play *big man* for his friends and girlfriend at my expense. That's another thing I really hated, so invited him to take our little dispute out into the woods behind the apartment building where we could settle it alone, telling him I didn't want his friends jumping in when he got his ass kicked, but really to isolate him. It was a chess move, figuring I'd'a probably got my ass kicked in a bare handed, *one-on-one* with this chump, which is why he started it, he *musta'* out weighed me thirty or more pounds and that woulda' made me really mad, so instead bluffed him into stepping out across a border I knew he wasn't counting on. Well, I didn't actually *know*, I gambled. He went for it though, so without another word led him out into the snow covered night to where he thought he'd enjoy pummeling me, down a path carved through barren trees and scattered shrubs into a small clearing about two or three minutes walk from the apartment, just far away enough from everybody to get it done without any witnesses. Then suddenly, in the quiet of the frozen clearing turned away from him, knelt down reaching into my boot, pulled out the big knife and in a quick flash pivoted back around and went at him with wild, overhead swings – fierce and fast – but not too fast, timed just so as to make him run *and* to let him get away. I wasn't ready for that much blood on my fifteen year old hands just yet. Scared the fake John Wayne crap right out of him though, and just like planned all that *toughguy* shit disappeared with his huffing and puffing, terrified, running form – bear turned to rabbit – loved it and didn't have to run very fast or very far after him to be rid of that big ugly fool, though I did give some token chase just to make it look good and make sure he didn't turn back around which would have meant something even worse, putting me in *check* like that, something really, really bad, only one move left to make after that so anyhow, it was just a little teenage delinquent fun and wanted him to get away and me too without any blood spilled that night, at least not mine. Now though, there was another problem. I

was alone and lost in strange woods at night, cut off and far from home, no money and my friends with their car, they were back at the party about 75 yards away wondering what the hell happened to me. Next, the big idiot returns to the apartment and tells everybody that I *pulled a knife* on him, like it was the shock of the century, the *Hindenburg – Pearl Harbor* – hey – he brought two fists and a beer belly to a knife fight to use on a little guy, so his friends get all pissy righteous and formed a posse-lynch mob of about twelve angry boys to go after me. Hidden in the shadows of barren trees under the clear cold winter moonlight I watched my quick breath dance in crude circles of cloudy smoke exhaled over head while eyeing the gang gathering to come at me like the peasants after *Frankenstein*. I sensed their excitement. I casually pissed my nickname, *Kabbo,* inside the sooty edges of a frozen patch of dirt framing the otherwise bright, white snow, too high to be afraid, listening as the ice turned crackling to steam. From my dark and distant retreat I could see them way before they saw me – in fact they never did see me. I was able to keep far enough ahead of them, long enough for fate to intervene on my behalf. Somehow my friends were able to get to their car, leave the "party" and get to me before the mob did. They hid me under blankets in the back seat while making a risky return trip back to the apartment to pick up another of our stragglers or two. *Kabbo* was a real one-man party pleaser, you betcha'. We got away and it was fine, just another night. They were a little annoyed though, the guys, being heavily outnumbered by these yokels and would have had a tough time getting away themselves had they not played it just right, which thankfully they did. These white-trash tattooed types love prison; they think it makes them real men to do time, so nothing much except losing their beer money or scratchin' the paint off their muscle car's finish really bothers them. Dangerous people these inbred, trailer-park fucks. Ever see *Deliverance?* This was *Aintry*. My friends were pissed though, but I reminded them that it wasn't my idea to go out to a party in *Whitetrashland* anyway. They were *Pat Esposito*'s friends not mine, it was his idea and he's just another crazy brother, a knucklehead story all his own there's no need for now but might get to later. So "*forget it,*" I said and like

the good buddies they were, after a muted grumble or two they did. They knew I was crazy, borderline murderous, which they respected, and yet at the same time was a good friend you could count on, so what's the point of pissin' me off anyway? But this night, this sugar packet revenge from the diner night, yes, it's clear, young Kabbo called the shot.

Yeah. I was sixteen years old, sweet sixteen and man did it hurt – hurt like hell, real Hell, practically all the time too – felt like I was walking around with a dagger stuck in my heart. It hurt when I breathed. Pain was my life. Absorbing and inflicting pain – seriously. Unless I was stoned out of my mind then it hurt a little less – from unbearable to just about bearable. Yeah, that's how we put it, "*stoned out of our minds*." This was no joke or otherwise empty phrase, this was serious medication and I needed it: THC, LSD, pot, hash, cocaine, ups, downs, meth, mesc, dope and speed, beer, wine, Mad Dog 20/20, Boone's Farm Apple Wine, Thunderbird, Tango, Sangria, the bottom drool of a thrown away liquor bottle, anything. Like the brothers say, it *ain't nothin' but a thing*. Just open it and pour it down – no big deal – it'll get you where you wanna go. Laugh, laugh your way to tears and cry your way into oblivion – and when I got there, you better watch out, `cause like I told you before now all the hurt, all the pain I felt all the time now you were gonna' feel it too – in spades if I could. Lotso' collateral damage, no surgical strikes here. See? My philosophy of life at that point was: *the only way to reduce my own pain was to share it with you. That I did by hurting you.* It's simple, direct, to the point and when you're hurting bad enough like I surely was, satisfying, and sometimes even fun so don't say I didn't warn ya'. Tonight, because Douchebag Dave Perkins said my girlfriend wasn't pretty, which was a damn lie, she was gorgeous, and `cause he had a car, drugs, and money all the time, plus a big house and family he could count on, and I had to suck up to him to get some, any of it, mostly the drugs, I decided it was payback time, like when the *Droogs* stole the car and paid a visit to *The Home*. The remark about my girlfriend bothered me particularly for two reasons: one

was that he had the balls to say it knowing it would get back to me and two, the deeper reason was `cause of my state of all consuming love for her – mostly unrequited – as vulnerably in love as only a sixteen year old can be. That's what I hurt so bad all the time about – that and my parents breaking up just then too. No family, no support, only drugs, music and friends and my heartless ability to inflict pain on others for relief – and if all that wasn't bad enough, on top of everything else there were the mind crushing headaches. Skull splitting *cluster headaches* the doctor called them, whatever you called'm they were *killer* – like a hot poker thrust through your eyeball into your brain and left there twisting, burning and expanding for hours at a time – freezing daggers in my heart and burning spikes through my skull – real, deep, soul crushing pain. That's pain baby, that's hurt, the kind that too many of my close young friends, friends when you're low and need people to stave off the abyss, friends that take you in when you can offer nothing in return except gratitude, friends that bought their last tickets with pain, may their souls now and forever rest in peace, David Klugman, Alan Koenigsdorf, and Jimmy Hickey. But *me?* Let me in your house I'll go straight to your bathroom, lock the door, open the medicine cabinet, look through the vials of your mother's pills and help myself to whatever said for *pain* or *sleep*. If you made the mistake of befriending me by inviting me to your home to party when your parents were out? I'd find a moment to casually excuse myself then proceed to unlock one of your windows so I could come back later, maybe alone or maybe with *Droogs* and help myself to whatever you had inside that I might want, a suede jacket, a stereo, your booze and of course, drugs up first. Once, a few of us returned to Larry Krieger's house after the hosted party was officially over. His parents were out of town and he was sleeping at another relative's nearby home, so we decided to have ourselves an after hours second party, this time hosting ourselves courtesy his parent's liquor cabinet and stereo, telling ourselves that what Larry didn't know, a peaceful chap, wouldn't hurt him or us. After we'd had our fill, instead of leaving and locking the doors (and windows) behind us, like thoughtful and friendly trespassing burglars might, we fell

asleep, out cold from all the booze and weed. That morning, to this day it's a mystery, we were woken by the annoying ringing of the telephone pounding into our young, hung over heads when one of us made the colossal blunder of answering it. It was the parents checking on their son, they recognized immediately that we were not he and something was very, very wrong. With that, we went back to sleep like the world was ours, while they called the house where their kid was supposed to be sleeping to let them know, and alarming them came driving right over, unlocked the front door to find two or three of us making ourselves at home, covered in their bed sheets like sultans in paradise and threw us out. Quickly exiting and though caught and discovered, never had to pay for that particular sin, to which I attribute the *charity to wayward teenagers* of our unintended hosts, they didn't want any more trouble than they already had. They didn't rat. Smart. Cool. Good. And we were grateful. It would have been quite bad had the police arrived while we were still lounging as though everything was everything. To us, despite the close call with handcuffs and jail-cells it was a joke, we were entitled to whatever we could take or get away with, that's just that, that's us, just like the *Droogs*.

Aside from greed and selfishness and the joys of being bad, it was really all about the pain. Mine was a desperate, chronic and relentless agony caused by the hungry, starving, lonely, passion I had for another sixteen year old. A young girl really, with braces on her teeth no less, a girl becoming a woman, a slithering, venomous snake of a woman and her name, may I live to forgive, was *Sherry,* Sherry Levine. And what a passion serpent she was, like nothing else before and nothing else after. She was 100% beautiful, firm and virgin, with long straight brown auburn, silk hair framing blue eyes set wide in pink-white, flawless, soft skin. Her full lips, to this day, her breath, well, they engulfed me in a sea of warm ecstasy unbound by gravity, mortality or the finite senses. I would float between the lost rhythms of wild heartbeats, submerged in passion and vacant of thought on the power of her deep, soul-caressing kisses – stronger than LSD. Sounds like poetry I know but I mean it literally. Man she

was hot! Once on acid, without her knowing, I remember kissing her and measuring the differences in impact, her kisses trumped even the power of the lysergic. Embracing her in tightly with all my heart's intention the thought occurred to my untutored mind that she was the other half of me. It was my soul speaking to my brain with the language of the heart, emotion, and it whispered: *the missing half is now found*, completion, the *Yin* to her *Yang* – and it felt that way to every conscious, living and breathing part of me so you can imagine the pain I felt as she steadily pulled, strained and tore to get away; telling me at the end of each phone call that she *loved* me, all the while maintaining the most painful words in the English language, that she "*needed to see other people*." She wasn't mine. Nothing else mattered. We'd already performed the traditional ritual; after that first time gave her my gold bar-mitzvah ring, the one with my initials, which she wore on a chain around her neck. The thought of someone else touching her, the sound of a word with the *sh* in it, the thought of her giving some other guy a smile, a thought, a kiss, a promise or even just a look was enough to put me to drowning in an ocean of despair darker and more sorrowful than all the other sorrows ever felt by anyone else ever in this life of "*...the thousand natural shocks that* [mortal] *flesh is heir to...*" – this was all thousand of them, one at a time again and again. That's what it felt like. All I could do was cry out in pain, I mean with real salt tears, alone and to myself, in my room, on the streets, in a public theater, as a busboy in the neighborhood steak house, anywhere, it didn't matter, I was overcome – and to the world at large, out loud and with a panicked, rageful desperation I cried for vengeance. Once she'd pull too far and sensed me fade and whither, dying, she'd be for a moment kind and draw me shaken and hurt back in. Nothing else mattered, nothing else existed. All my thoughts, all my actions were geared to one end: to having some part of me inside some part of her and how to survive long enough until I could make that moment happen – which wasn't easy – I could barely breathe – like the first time – yes, I was her first, it was beautiful, in the dark, so naturally and unplanned, driven and overcome by the feral forces of Mother Nature, pure, unadulterated, like every girl hopes it will be

and she made it happen again, this time planned, a second time, a week later at her friend's house in the next town and then no more, at least not for another year, so the torture went on – the craving, the headaches, neediness, the endless denial kept alive by the hope it might pass and we'd be back somehow to where we started with that first warm and soul penetrating kiss. That was the only time or place I ever felt any peace, completely whole and alive, inside of her, when we were one, kissing, touching, hearing her say she loved me. Then her tortuous game began, like a seasoned pusher she knew what to do and how to do it. She musta' had evil instincts, nobody could have taught her, who knows? Just a little taste to get me started; get to feeling nice, real nice, nicer than I ever imagined possible, then just when it seemed my world had changed radically and for the first time, and that now I was no longer alone but with another, joined by body, soul and heart, cut off. Always wanting, living in a world of waiting hours, counting aching hours and minutes between phone calls and dates. If I wasn't with her or at least on the phone with her I had to be asleep or high, *stoned out of my mind* or at the very least seeking relief by hurting somebody else. She played the "*I love you – I love you not*" game with me, caught like a wingless fly in her pitiless web. The cruelest of the cruel, this woman child sent by the trickster gods and demons to torment me when at my weakest, practically paralyzed by the soft sting of her thick liquid voice, with only the strength to struggle but none to get away – hitchhiking frozen, empty, heartbroken miles in the snow at night to stand under her second story bedroom window and call to her, throwing pebbles up against glass, speaking in urgent hushed whispers, hoping she would say something assuring, something kind or affectionate as she occasionally did and I could live another hour, another day. I well remember that first hesitant kiss, its warmth taking me by surprise so kissed her again, the second right away, almost involuntarily it felt, like a heartbeat, an overpowering magnetic draw, hooking me in deeply, deeper than I ever knew existed, lasting from that moment on. There were no other women in the universe except *Sherry* and it stayed like that for me for a very long, long time.

"Your day breaks – your mind aches – you find that all her words of kindness linger on when she no longer needs you – and in her eyes you see nothing..." (Lennon & McCartney)

Unsurprisingly, it began with pain, the pain of me laying in a hospital bed, trying to nurse myself through an infection in my right leg, a deep gash in the calf wherein resided a stubborn colony of *ecoli* bacteria which found its way into my otherwise healthy flesh through an injury I recklessly inflicted on myself a week or so before. Seems there was a kid on a street corner holding an ice cream cone one night I decided should be mine so as he happily walked about indulging in its sweetness, I sprang from my sitting position to grab it from him. A harmless enough stunt for me to attempt except for the fact that the seat I was springing from was mounted to the moving car me and my pals were driving around in when deciding I just had to have that kid's ice cream right now.

So, my leg was nearly crushed between the chassis and the asphalt, yeah, I opened the door as it slowed to make the turn but never waited for the car to stop before jumping out, and beer'd up as I must'a been neither my timing nor my agility were up to par, so the kid kept his ice cream while I ended up in the emergency room. A week later, after the antibiotics administered at Mercy Hospital in RVC where the driver took me showed no sign of treating the badly infected wound, ended up being brought by my parents to the hospital in Oceanside, South Nassau Community, where once admitted was placed on intravenous tetracycline, hoping and praying it'd clear up the infection and I'd keep my leg. There had been doubt. The nurses held my hand when they told me. It was shock on top of shock. Real fear. That's where, when and how we met. Her girlfriend Ann was a *candy-striper* there, a volunteer high-school girl, too fat for me and she knew it but must have thought the wounded warrior was cute and in need of love or rescue and so just right for her thin, foxy, blue-eyed friend and so brought Sherry in to meet me. At first she looked kinda' weird, as she described herself, a *French-Negro-cat* but something drew me in anyway, maybe it was

her quiet attention, her coloring, a special softness and warmth I couldn't quite identify or resist but felt, anyway, at first, it was she who drove it. I was already seeing a girl at the time, *Donna Malucci*, a blond-haired, sweet smiled and big breasted girl who I recall not much about `cause I ended it with her for Sherry as soon as I could, before even leaving the hospital. Donna survived and went on to date my Droogish running buddy Jimmy and for years they were an item, and I was just as happy to see them both hooked up and enjoying life. Savage me, was still capable of vicarious joy if not empathy. Empathy, Kabbo decidedly lacked. No hard feelings, we only *went out* – no exchanges of gifts or promises, never gave her my bar-mitzvah ring, not even sure that we ever consummated, but in any case neither of us stayed with out a date or a companion for very long, bad for the image, or missed the thrill of cheap sex, kisses and pets, bad for the complexion and worse for the reputation. So, since there was no real fire there to speak of, that was that. Easy in – easy out. With sweet Sherry though? There was intense romantic fire, unlike anything before, or truth be told, ever again, as I've written, but after the brief, nirvanic, honeymoon, maybe a month it got painful, a burning existential fire, a scalding crushing flame as bad and excruciating as the needles prodding my veins collapsed from weeks of tetracycline. Maybe worse. It was bad, it was worse than bad; it was terrible bad. But tonight, this diner night like every night I wasn't with her I was high, good and high, fucked up and cruisin' the lonely streets to the fierce and transcendent chords of electric guitar rhythms with the guys, my trusted and loyal, lost and vengeful teenage friends.

The Droogs

My friends were my salvation and sanctuary, my friends, my music and my drugs. There was Jimmy Kane, the first born son of a tall, gray-haired, crew-cutted, Nassau County Republican, a manufacturer, an Irish-Catholic church go*er* with like twelve kids, too many to count with all basically the same face, a country club

guy with government defense contracts and a big English Tudor in the upper-class section of the good `ol Rock. We partied plenty up there in Jimmy's big ol' top floor attic bedroom. Before we ever got there though, there was the usual Friday night ritual. After telephoning each other to find out who had the weed, arrange the time and meeting place, split the money, maybe like five bucks each and cop. *Cop*, that is like to *score*, acquire, get. We'd meet the dude and cop, between the four or so of us, an ounce or a half-ounce, then go back to one of our houses to clean, divide and smoke. So, say back at Jimmy's, we'd go upstairs, real quiet and conspiratorial like, serious and focused, sit around a small table at the edge of the long room near the window, far from where the *tell-tale* odor of burning cannabis could betray us by leaking from beneath the door. His oldest sister, Meghan, her bedroom was right below, and she was a rat. The girl put her hands on him one time, full of herself and her karate lessons, so, Jimmy had to smack her back to Earth a bit, but still, we had to be careful. Anyway, we'd take out an album cover, like Neil Young's *Harvest* or Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Pictures at an Exhibition* or our favorite *The Dark Side of the Moon* and pour the whole bag out onto its opened, flat surface. You had to choose an album that opened up, like a double LP, use both sides to cradle the pot, then after cleaning, carefully pour it into our respective bags or vials, a ritual sacrament. All the seeds and twigs were extracted so nothing was left but powder and the treasured buds, the good parts, the flower, where the THC was concentrated. The twigs were garbage so you had to make certain that when you scored you weren't paying for too many twigs, you wanted as close to *pure powder* as you could get, but the seeds were sometimes kept `cause you could (and some did) grow your own. At least try to. I never bothered. Well, I may have tried once, but it's real work, albeit a labor of love, it took too long and required patience so forget it, patience was not on the menu, it was easier and faster to buy or grub or steal. One time, an entrepreneurial kid with a green thumb from the next town made the mistake of showing off for me and Jimmy where he grew his little patch of ripening cannabis, it was in someone's back yard or an abandoned alley covered with tall weeds

and shrubs. That night we went back with big plastic bags and had ourselves a little harvest of our own. We didn't really know what to do with all these fresh, wet pot plants so we put them in an oven and smoked the dried out leaves and ashes but all we got were headaches for our troubles, probably burned the THC right out of them. We henceforth called bad or weak pot "*headache weed*." Meanwhile, back to the routine, after the whole ounce was cleaned, we'd divide it into roughly equal parts and distribute it among ourselves, then take turns filling pipe bowls and rolling joints, lighting and passing them along, smoking ourselves silly – fits of laughter all night long. Who was better than us? What was better than this? But it was a real ritual, the scoring, the cleaning, the dividing, the music and finally, the best part, the smoking – nothing better – bunch of renegade teenagers doing their things, usually the four of us, a steady crew of *Droogs* we were for a while, against the law, having fun and getting high. Buzzed. Someone might ask: *catch a buzz?* Got stoned to Neil Young and read the *National Lampoon*. It was a pretty funny magazine then, creative, outrageous and new. *Mona Gorilla, Playdead Magazine*, photos of beautiful women philosophizing in the nude at a laundromat or a press conference – not at all sensitive or virtuous – no such concepts then, it was more like *fuck everybody!* And my man Che' with egg on his face asking: "*Is nothing sacred?*" When I listened to Pink Floyd's masterpiece *The Dark Side of the Moon* album there and first heard those shattering alarm bells go off, after *Brain Damage* leading into *Time,* man I was so jolted out of my stoned, euphoric bliss I almost fell off the chair. In fact, the first *few times*. *Whata'* rush! Took ten minutes for my heart rate to drop back to normal. After we'd pass from the happy, zombie, trance stage of the marijuana buzz we'd reach the next level of stoned, the *munchies.* The Kane's, Jimmy's folks always had enough food around to feed their clan of loyal Catholics and Jimmy was always generous with it. After all, without birth control they in fact had a small if undisciplined army to feed. After smoking up a storm we'd creep downstairs barely holding back jokes, laughter and foolishness, past all the kids' rooms, past his sleeping parents' bedroom and down once more from the dark side of Jimmy's

spacious room and into the warmth of the large country kitchen where instead of a regular table they had a big, old, wooden picnic table. What else with that many hungry kids to feed? There we'd cook and eat fantastic grilled-cheese sandwiches adding slices of tomato and drink chocolate milk by the half-gallon 'til four or five in the morning. We thought we were gourmets `cause we figured out how to add the slice of tomato to the grilled cheese – they were so good – heavy on the butter, palate paradise with plenty of time. No one went to school anymore and Jimmy worked for his parents so it didn't matter what time anybody went to bed or woke up. These guys were all two or three years older than me, they were already out, graduated, or quit, and I never really went back to school since the beginning of the semester after ending up in the hospital from my failed ice-cream snatching from a moving car stunt.

Then there was my main, tightest, running partner and blood-brother Tommy Hayes, or as I called him *Hannibal Hayes*, an *all-county* wrestling champ just my size, wiry and strong and quick like a cobra and so a perfect sparring partner for me and man did we brawl, with others and each other, always keeping the knife-edge sharp. On more than one occasion, say, at night after just finishing the fifth or sixth can of a warm six-pack in the back alley of a shopping center he'd suddenly punch me in the face and so trigger a brawl that would sometimes last for hours, like the time it began by *Bethesda Fountain* in *Central Park* where we were drinking MD 20/20 with a few members of the much revered and widely feared Spanish Harlem street gang the Savage Skulls, to whom it seemed he wanted to make a social statement by slugging me in their presence, *white suburb boys throw down too*, something like that, that's how it began and so it continued for hours, I kid you not, between short breaks for air then back to punching and kicking and grappling, onto the subway then the Long Island Railroad all the way back to the tree-lined streets home in the Rock. Even at sixteen the strain on the body from that brawl lasted for days. Other times like when he saw me teetering on the pit of despair due to *you-know-who* he'd try to cheer me up or at least distract me by promising *I'll start a fight*. It

felt better just hearing those words, even though I had to pay for my fun once or twice with a broken nose, like the time with Hannibal in my train-station turf – the two of us against a few of them, me positioned atop a fixed, wooden bench pounding downward away at the crown of one of my regular target's head, a nerdy Catholic school kid named Eugene, yeah, like my grandpa' only Irish, every time we crossed paths I either attacked or threatened him, no reason, just for the rush, anyway, that time he got lucky flailing his arms wildly in awkward defense and accidentally, at least unintentionally clipped me at just the right angle to snap it – the cartilage. Man that sucked, the post surgery follow-up procedures in particular – whatever, everything has a price – otherwise, a good brawl meant pressure would be released – just throwing a solid punch, feeling it land hard into someone's mug was especially gratifying, someone besides me was going to hurt, courtesy two of the *Droogs*. Our preferred method, say in a crowd outside a movie theater or park entrance was to separate by a few yards so they'd think he was solo, then for him to approach a bigger kid, or a small group of kids and start an argument that would lead to a shoving match at which point me, watching from a slight distance just out of sight would suddenly jump in out of nowhere and deck the first closest guy taking them by total surprise – pain and fear *blitzkrieg style*. Victory. It always worked, cheered me up, and kept me, I'm confident from doing something far, far worse. *Hannibal Hayes and Kid Kabbo* I imagined us as like the cool TV show at the time about two likeable outlaws that occasionally got caught but always escaped. We were two compact guys with a lot to prove and the determination to do so, to the world and to each other. When not brawling, we'd be playing chess, grooving to the Mahavishnu Orchestra on his high-end Marantz, stealing, stashing, and drinking beers, smoking weed, building and working out Bruce Lee-style with *nunchak*u, shooting his pellet gun in their finished basement, and chasing *poontang*. Once, the day before a class field trip, we shoplifted beer, one or two cans at a time, supermarket to supermarket, hid them in some thick shrubs by the school, then met to drink'm early the next morning, probably about five or six each before getting on the

bus. When not in tears, life was a party. What else is there really to do in *teenage wasteland* while waiting to grow up, settle into lifetime conformity and then die? We weren't worried about SATs or heading to college. Hannibal, son of a mostly MIA midtown corporate hotshot wanted to be a marine biologist and started as a local commercial fisherman in Freeport a few towns away and me, son of a Brooklyn born optometrist? I had serious doubts about whether or not I'd even make it long enough to care about what to be once I broke twenty – plus he had a foxy older sister, Dale who'd usually be home when I came to visit, sometimes for days on end, (the backdoor of their huge, old English Tudor was always left open so I pretty much had free range, no appointments or invites necessary) as I'd be working my way towards her. Though it never happened the chance was always there and I planned for it, step by cautious step, for Dale an invitation would be needed, but she had that fleeting, mischievous Irish sparkle in her eyes when she set them on me while wearing her thin, cotton pajamas, capturing my imagination and creating an indelible impression through her slightly opened bedroom door, except of course until I met *you-know-who* when my entire known, romantic world prior came to a grinding end with that first, world-shifting, poisonous kiss. Tighter friends, though you couldn't imagine, even after meeting *you-know-who*, somehow having the mysterious power to pull me from that dark and abysmal edge of remorseless despair. To prove our sincerity, fidelity, and testosterone levels, we stuck ourselves with switchblades, cutting through the hairless skin of our inner forearms deeply enough to create permanent scars, drawing enough blood to then rub together, mixing it in declaration of blood brothers to the end, with nothing left friendship-wise to prove. Then there was *Fondue*, a lanky, blue-eyed, blue-collared, lecherous, leprechaun-looking chap who got his nickname, the legend goes, by using said object, a *fondue bowl* to defecate in, then left it in the kitchen cupboard of the house where he was partying when nature thus summoned. Guests like him are thankfully rare. He grew to hate the nickname, but once the word got out, it stuck and was his for keeps. He was Fondue, I mean after all, you gota' hand it to him, by that

thoughtful, distinctive and widely publicized gesture he well earned a permanent moniker to his credit – even one as obscenely rooted as that. And speaking of obscenities, aside the common clash of teenage egos, there was no love lost between us even before his vulgar assault on my family honor. One night, the erring elf came up behind me outside our much beloved teenage sanctuary, the *Uniondale Mini-Cinema,* and literally pushed too far. Said sanctuary was a hippie run movie theater a few towns away, hitchhiking distance, that showed art films we called *underground movies,* like Lenny Bruce performances and *Monterey Pop,* where they let the audience drink beer and smoke pot inside. Almost everything was a goof there, pure satire, like we'd throw fake epileptic fits in the lobby, suddenly dropping down to the floor on our backs, mimicking spastic spasms of choking with wild eyes and gagging sounds until an alarmed crowd gathered, then as soon as enough witnesses arrived suddenly crack up, laughing at the prank, ourselves and the now amused spectators. It was always a rush, three of us squeezing in to drive there one night in the tough-rich, loud-mouthed, sometimes bully Jewish kid's green, two-door Alpha Romeo convertible, Jeff Aaronson, me, him and Jimmy to see the original *Night of the Living Dead,* a shocker even in '74 with the zombie-girl eating her mother's heart dug out from the chest with a gardening spade, another time dropping acid at midnight at an all night New Year's Eve movie marathon including my favorites, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *The Hellstrom Chronicles*, *The Groove Tube*, Hendrix's *Rainbow Bridge*, *Going Places*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Freaks*, *The King of Hearts* and *Fantastic Planet*. When combined with the theater's comforting darkness, drugs, booze, cigarettes, and friends, the Mini offered near perfect escapism, even providing momentarily relief from the ongoing agony of a broken heart. It wasn't all peace and love though, nope, not with Kabbo around, one night, just after Scar and the boys picked me up at *you-know-who's*, already on edge, while standing on line to get in, Fondue came up quietly behind me and suddenly grabbed the back of my arms in rough-house play, causing me to spill the last of the weed I'd been carefully rolling into a joint. That was it; payback for many a

transgression, trivial and serious, was due, so I exploded with a long suppressed force, turned around to his face, grabbed him by the upper arms, then with a single fluid move, body-slammed the grinning fool to the curb of the concrete sidewalk where he lay dazed and groaning until two older hippies we knew from the Rock helped him up so he could slowly, with their help, limp away It was a blast of stored rage and well-deserved resentment; payback's a bitch, like they say. When they lifted his shirt to inspect the damage, it looked like he'd been hit by a car where his hip made contact with the curb, red, raw, and turning purple. He earned it all, the bruised flesh and damaged pride. Balance restored. Suffice it to say, the insult to my family's honor needed reckoning, and now vengeance, though not cold, was still mine. Account closed.

A year or two before, on a dry and chilly fall night, at about thirteen or fourteen, having already left the private school just after my bar-mitzvah and now attending public school for the first time, a wild animal sprung loose from a steel cage, the local boys from my neighborhood, mostly Irish and Italian kids, took me *out drinking.* It seemed drinking, as in boozing, was an activity for them on its own. A thing to do. *Cool* I decided – *not as cool as psychedelic drugs but let's give it a try.* Except for downing some of the swill that gets returned on trays fed to the catering hall dishwashers we slugged down as anesthesia I might have cajoled a few Whisky Sours before at other kids' bar-mitzvahs and had a beer or two my father bought me on a blue moon while watching the *amazing Mets,* but to drink purely for the sake of getting drunk? That was a new one – like Dean Martin and a bit counter-revolutionary it seemed to the Sixties kid – but as a renegade was still eager to try About four or five of us, close buddies despite my going to a different school before that these were the neighborhood kids I rode bikes with, played street games with, shoplifted with, wrestled and smoked cigarettes with so we were known to each other and they were trusted, more or less and since my standing mission was to show them that the *Jewish kid* from *Brooklyn* could be just as bad or even worse than they were went along for the ride. Gathered together at the far end of the block

under the soft glow of a street lamp they had a green, plastic, army-looking canteen of what was probably gin or vodka, passing it around taking big gulps at each turn, when it got to me took a big swig and immediately began choking, retching and coughing, eyes watering and thought they must have poisoned me – no one could possibly actually drink this crap! *What for?* I mean really! It tasted like turpentine or gasoline I imagined, smelled like them too. Of course, they went hysterical at my reaction but I watched them swallow too so sucked that up as well, the ridicule, it was another *right of passage* I understood, getting laughed at but sticking it out anyway so gathering my determination took another less hefty swallow on the next turn around which went down a bit easier and again and again and again, with each swallow a warmer and fuller sense of ease and excitement replacing the paranoia and disgust of the first few shots. It never reached tasting *good* though. Just less and less brutal. The next thing I do remember is them trying to feed me black coffee at *Wetson's,* the local hamburger chain before things went totally black until finding myself on the stairway at home being pounded and kicked in the head by dear old dad handling himself with his usual considered dignity and aplomb.

The next part of this story was only told, not witnessed by me but word was and from multiple, reliable sources, that father dear thought sonny-boy might have been drugged or poisoned by the neighborhood pals and left the house to confront the two boys who had just deposited me on the front doorstep to find out precisely with what and exactly by who. Seated on the crumbling brick front steps of the house across the street were *Fondue* and another closer friend who lived there Jerry O'Brian. Jerry was an older brother type, a kid from another eight kid Irish-Catholic family whose own father dear cut out on them and mom years before (the mom was known to be a close friend of the bottle herself) leaving them in the lurch, so he earned a significant degree of neighborhood sympathy and a measure of respect for his steady helping the best he could with the younger siblings to manage their troubles while also maintaining a reasonable facade of family dignity under tough

circumstances, abandonment and drunkenness. They pulled together, Jerry with two of the other older siblings, Johnnie, a hard-working older brother, a Catholic school varsity athlete that worked full time after school at the local supermarket and like Hannibal's another hot and foxy, plaid skirt and knee socks wearing big sister, Marie, looking just like their mother only younger and unharried by abandonment and years of romancing the sauce, but it was still a roughshod endeavor, lawn never mowed, house never painted, just getting by, kids raising kids in place of the adults. Jerry was a dark haired, broad shouldered bigger kid about two years my senior who I wrestled with, hard, fiercely, but never beat, practicing karate moves in my basement or their backyard strewn with lawn mower parts and an old, unregistered, sedan on cinder blocks with its windshield shattered, hood missing and engine half assembled, who showed me around right after moving there from *the city*, took me fishing at a local man-made lake, caught a duck with his bare hands to impress me which I insisted be set free, and demonstrated how to fix a bicycle flat, teaching me a wrench from a pliers, and told me some insane secrets about women's anatomy that I could hardly believe my ears about – which turned out to be amazingly true – mostly all of them, *their nipples actually get hard when you touch them and they like it? Y'mean like a dick? No way. No fucken way. Crazy.* Anyway, back to the less than propitious event, they resented his interrogation so much so that one of them, probably *Fondue* pulled a knife and with it both of them chased him back into the house, cursing him out and making remarks of an unrepeatable nature about his wife, my mother, including defamatory references to our ethnicity, "Jew-bitch" type of remark. Another neighbor, our cop friend across the street, a sergeant in the local PD, a man nobody in his or her right mind would ever fool with, drunk or otherwise, so fearsome was his look, like if a bulldog was handsome, and linebacker stature had to intervene and end it before catastrophe arrived. That and an extraordinary hangover was what woke me the next day, my first night *out drinking* with the boys. Baptized (to the drinking life) by fire, so-to-speak. Why I ever bothered to do it again is testament to the stubborn determination to

prove myself in the way described and rebel against the nerdy, *nice Jewish boy* accountant stereotype. And as a special added bonus, if all that night before action weren't wonderful enough, now had to get revenge on these two former friends for the disrespect they showed my family. When I swore revenge, even just to myself, you could bank on it. It might take some time, but it would happen. Deposit that check. Unfortunately though, timing wise and coincidentally both these fella's had just been inducted into one of the local fraternities which at that point rendered them basically untouchable, fight one fight them all was the unwritten code, something about disrespecting their *colors* – lucky for them, so my plans had to wait which was fine, I wasn't going anywhere and neither were they. Time would be on my side, and *Fondue* got his on that parking lot pavement, and Jerry's some time soon after would come in the aforementioned RVC train-station, which was basically my turf, or *stomping ground*, literally, where my graffiti tag *Kabbo* in only white chalk, high up above the seating area on the outside wall was stylistically scrawled and untouched for many, many years, probably a full decade or more in simple, but lasting chalk dust immortality. One cold, winter night up there in the open, well lit, waiting room vestibule a level above the street between the tracks a few of us *Droogs* plus Jerry gathered to smoke pot and drink some beer before hitting the local town barrooms. Someone, probably me decided it was a good idea to light a small fire with some of the bundles of thrown away newspapers littering the floor, so I crumpled a handful together and lit the match. The idea was to keep warm or just get warm, not burn anything down or start a fight, we were partying not prowling and the place was not otherwise heated, it was *January* cold and without the added flame we'd have been frozen as well as surrounded by dark. For some reason Jerry though, (word among the boys was that he was *tripping*) objected to my initiative and stamped out the freshly lit flame. Up 'til then I'd never mentioned the incident with my dad to either of these two guys, I basically ignored it or went along with the idea that it was my father who instigated it so the blame lay entirely with him, *yeah*, *right*, maybe, whatever, but the words about my *mother?* Totally different

case. Everyone concerned knew who Kabbo was back then and what to expect, meaning that at any time, even years later the response might arrive and tonight in the cold abandon of an otherwise empty vestibule for Jerry it was that time. At first I warned him about stamping out the fire and relit it one or two more times, each time ignoring me he defiantly stamped it out again until finally elicited from me a quick, sharp, hard shot to the center of his face with my rock-solid fist leaving him stunned, bloody and shrieking. The acid he was allegedly on mighta' played into my hands because he didn't come after me or respond in anyway except for wiping the blood from his nose, looking at it on his hands and the hysterical shrieking which pretty much mirrored what I felt that morning hearing the ugly tale of his attack and insults to my family. Another account settled. Balance restored and a simple, personal, justice served. No big thing. Oddly enough, unlike with *Fondue* Jerry and I became closer friends after that. He musta' known somewhere inside his quieter thoughts that payback for that incident was coming and now that it had finally arrived, blood coming from the center of his shocked face mixing with snot from his nose and tears in his eyes the issue was now closed. *Crazy* life like that, so here's to Jerry, settling scores and freeing captive ducks.

Next up as an official, original *Droog* was Jimmy, a relatively quiet, sarcastic, good looking and confidant kid with long, straight, wheat colored shoulder length hair, about my height plus a couple and a regularly appearing troublemaker smile that said without words "*fuck it* Kabbo, let's do it!" as his signature conspiratorial smirk; always had a cute girlfriend; not a hitter, no one beat him up at home as a kid I suspect, but not a runner either, in other words he'd rarely start a fight, but I never saw him back down from one either. I liked him. Being around him made me feel secure, like stable in some subtle way even though he attracted as much trouble as I did, on his own and without my help. He was okay though, laughing, joking, drinking and smoking. It was great! We watched Nixon resign on his big living room TV. That was hard to forget. His parents just about tolerated us, straight laced Irish-Catholics that they were. We

knew where the line was in that house and in order to protect it as our prime haven we kept to it. That is, we tried real hard to not get caught while his parents tried real hard not to notice. One night I took Jimmy to an apartment house party I'd been invited to by a couple of twin sisters, day camp counselors where the three of us worked that summer. They were pretty cute and liked both of us. It was a small and otherwise peaceful gathering, just enough guests to fill a modest living room where the beer, music, testosterone, estrogen and reefer flowed. The two of us got so drunk, wasted and stoned we commandeered the stereo and played *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down* by The Band again and again when all we could do was sing along and spit into each others' faces at the end of every chorus. Don't ask me why, we weren't angry, we were hysterically laughing to belly ache with every deep snort and focused fire, big wet gobs of drunken, mucousy spit dead center into each other's mugs again and again for hours it seemed. Insane laughter. Needless to say the sisters weren't amused or impressed and neither of us scored that night but we were having too much fun being gross and outrageous to care. Females were easy enough for us to come by. It was pure, adolescent, crazy time; you're only young enough to be that absurdly ridiculous once with no regrets so even now and from here no regrets. Then there was big Phil Scarborough, "Lonesome" Scarborough I would call him with my exaggerated country drawl. He didn't have a girlfriend in those days so that and his pseudo-cowboy image prompted the *lonesome* title, like the loner Marlborough cowboy man. Laughing, smiling, joking and chain smoking, always with a car and a few bucks to spend, though not an official *Droog* on my roster he was still another good guy who could be relied on to be there and not run from a fight. Once, when we tripped out on acid, I observed that his head looked like an oversized apple. Don't ask me to explain, I can't, it just did. He looked like a life-sized, toy Mr. Applehead, a big, beaming, red smiling Macintosh apple, like a toy Mr. Potato Head but with real smoke coming out of its mouth. Phil's father either died or went AWOL when he was young, we never spoke about it. His mom was a sweet, cool `ol lady. A nurse I think, or his big sister Mary was,

not sure, it seems that way, at least in memory. Of this though it's clear, she always showed Phil and by extension us a lot of respect which in my tender, heart-broken and world-hating condition meant a lot so her medicine cabinet was out-of-bounds though it would likely have yielded treasures. While we all lived in houses they lived in an apartment building where the gravel and asphalt roof just outside his bedroom window covered the building's garage in which he stabled his precious stallion, the cherry red, reliable Mercury Cougar. We ranked on him that he needed a big set of steer's horns mounted to its front grill. Phil was a good sport too, I'd bust on him all the time about tryin' to look like some kinda' Marlborough /Scarborough man or a Space Cowboy with his crisp denim jacket, big stainless steel and turquoise belt buckles, western boots and of course his wheels, the trusty Cougar. All that was missing besides the hood ornament horns was the ten-gallon hat and I bet he probably wears one today. Scarz was a loyal friend then, picking me up every night outside my house to go out and party, to kill pain, for at least two years. Older than me by about two years it meant a lot to have a friend with wheels and bucks, someone to laugh with and count on meaning not chicken-out once things really got goin'. I never had much money, I worked and stole, but whatever I had was usually spent right away, that same day or night so Scarz was always *fronting* me. That is, putting up whatever, cigarettes, drugs, beer and gas money, 'til I could work, steal or otherwise hustle some more and pay him back. I don't actually remember ever paying him back – don't think we ever really cared, whatever I had whenever I had anything it was always thrown right back into the pot, pun intended. He was cool, didn't hassle me, went along with just about anything and never had to go home, once, even letting him see me come close to tears, me, Mr. Crazy Motherfucker Toughguy known to carry *nunchaku* hidden inside his oversized, military trench coat, in tears, `cause of *you-know-who* on a *love-him-not* turn. But Phil was cool, let me keep whatever shreds of dignity I managed to clutch on to and responded with silent, wordless sympathy. Another night we robbed a guy outside a regular stop local bar, jumped him in the parking lot out back and me pulling the *nunchaku* Scar warned:

"*he's crazy – he'll do it!*" and so didn't have to, crack him, already in shock and on the ground he gave up his cash, whatever it may have been, beer money, gas and smokes, split it with Scar and I felt some relief. At least I had a girlfriend when Scar didn't, he musta' considered that too when evaluating my sorrow and with that, his friendship and the red Cougar, just remember not to return to that particular bar anytime soon, we lit up, drank up and carried on.

Then finally, my good buddy to this day, Walter Thomas. I met Walt musta' been my very first day of high-school in the back of the park, the furthest place from the school building itself that was still on school property. Not that we wanted to get away, but we didn't exactly relish being there either. That was where we all hung out, a large group of ten to twenty or more kids, mostly white and mostly from the other side of town, of which my crew was an affiliate clique, otherwise all grades and classes and collar colors from both sides of Sunrise Highway, the one joining principle was our chief interest in cutting class to play cards for cigarette and beer money and get high. Everything else was touch and go in life, but for us getting high was a sacrament and we were religious. For that there was unqualified, ecumenical agreement and commitment. Walter though? It was his humor more than anything else that kept my attention, especially once the full buzz was on.

"*Where da `erb at?*" asked black Bobby McQueen, who probably dropped out about five years before, but still hung out on school property `cause it was the one place left where he could use the power of intimidation to get high on someone else's weed. I doubt he ever had his own, but if he ever did never would have kicked it in to share, certainly not with us – he wasn't that type. He was a *taker,* with a cool name – period. For example, when some pukey, faggoty, spoiled white kid who thought he was cool `cause he had some pot pulled a joint or two out of his bag to smoke with us made the mistake of remarking that he had only the joint or two to spare now and needed the rest for later. Bobby snatched the entire bag from his pasty, bony, hands and asserted with total command and finality and

perfect ghetto class, *African-American*: "*we blow `ti' we high!*" – and that was that – period – case closed. He tried to fit right in by just being there where nobody ever had the balls to ask, "*Hey, do you even still go here?*" He was a short, dark-skinned and with a reputation for being a very dangerous Negro who carried a heavy, wooden, walking, cane and wore a funky style Kangol cap. When you were around him you always felt a slight sense of dread like you would around a prowling, jackal, as though no matter how good a friend you thought you were or how hard you laughed at one another's jokes or coughed up weed smoke in each other's faces that cane was kept handy for a purpose and he could turn on you in a *half-a-heartbeat* if you stepped the wrong way. Bobby never played or postured with that cane in any way, which was his effective method of letting you know that it was no theatrical prop, it was for real. Business only. When a few of us white-boys left the deep, cold, picnic-table corner headed to the parking lot to find an unlocked car to smoke in Bobby decided to join us, he didn't feel the need for a personal invitation, when upon finding and entering an available car, the Kangoled *brotha'* then decided that the last fella' of our small group of maybe three or four constituted one too many so before the guy could get in, Bobby, already seated, slammed the door shut from the inside and with a fierceness that meant all business exclaimed, without even looking at him: "*You not invited!*" Slam! It wasn't his car, and it wasn't his pot, but that didn't register to anyone, or if it did, was discretely ignored. It was beside the point anyway. The point was that cane in his hands and the probability he'd use it to enforce his edict in the unlikely event of a challenge. We were just happy that he let us go along, all five foot nothing of him. So watch your step and watch your mouth. He's gone now anyway too by the way, passed last I heard. Whadaya' expect? As they say, live fast, die young and leave a pretty corpse! Well, two out of three ain't bad. He might have lived fast but I'm sure he died mean and I'd be real surprised if a quick violent end improved the looks of his young corpse any. Probably tried to grab something out of the wrong pair of hands and while a cane emphasizing a credible threat might scare most suburban, white kids with pimples and

braces driving their daddy's spare car to school, but as a real weapon against those twice as big and even only half as mean it has profound limitations. Walt did a great Bobby McQueen impression, snatching a fistful of air while growling: *you not invited*, capturing the essence and nuances of both threat and finesse, the memory of that in this memoir is all I gather that's left of him and his Kangol cap and cane. RIP Bobby McQueen, and on his tombstone it just might read "here lies Robert 'Bobby' McQueen – all others *you not invited – slam!"*

It was my first day up there in high-school with the big kids when I found myself at this place, the far corner of the park with this group who already did what I aspired to do with my education: cut class, play cards and get high. And there was Walt. Walt was a tall senior, skinny, funny, a sort of longhaired wise guy but not very tough. I usually liked to pick my friends according to how dangerous they might be or actually were, unless there was another good reason like they had a decent car, good weed or in Walt's case, they were funny. And Walter was funny. He had me laughing from the first minute we met. Not just laughing with him but laughing at him. It was at his behest that we laughed at his sarcastic, witty, Irish-English-Dutch self-deprecating humor, his self-parodies and insulting impersonations enhanced by a menu of foolish verbal noises, mimicking words, parodying parodies, Fireside Theater, "drink me... smoke me…" Ah... it's great sometimes to be a teenager, even with the pain! He'd take a serious pose, pause, then ask *if Jimi Hendrix fought Lou Reed, a fist-fight, no weapons, not even guitars, who would win? Stones against the Beatles? If the Stones had nunchaku and the Beatles switch-blades?* On the subject of our favorite cheese? *Crack-of-a-Woman's Ass Cheese*, of course, inserting the phrase in random pauses in sentences. Indeed. There was a popular TV commercial featuring a tub of margarine repeatedly insisting that it was "butter... butter..." in a quick, comical, cartoon voice, but Horse revised it using the same voice: "buttocks... buttocks... buttocks..." while we sat silently in the school auditorium gathered for an important assembly. Then it would spread. Random male

voices interrupted the presentation, chirping the one word, two-syllable phrase that said so much about what was always on our minds, stoned or straight, and put the girls on notice. Walt was not terrifically handsome; in fact his nickname around school was *Horsehead* or simply *Horse*. *Walter Thomas* was much too serious a name for a goofball like him. Horse. It was `cause of his bad acne-scarred skin and long chin hovering above and over his narrow shoulders atop a tall, lanky, and awkward frame that he appeared, well, *horse* like. With that, he had this hysterical talent for imitating the goofy people that made up our little world, making them seem even more the comical fools than they even really were. Walt was the funniest cat I knew, especially stoned, which we were practically all the time. There were times he had me laughing so hard I couldn't breathe, of course the weed helped and once he'd get on a roll he wouldn't stop, he'd zero in on the joke and get funnier and funnier 'til you had to quit laughing out of pure exhaustion or be overwhelmed by a throbbing headache. And Walt could take it as well as dish it out. He had to, ol' Horsehead did. I mean he couldn't really fight, although he probably would have loved to, he just didn't have that kinda' violence and meanness in him. His father musta' never laid a hand on him, never had to resort to it, he delivered his impact with words and stares, the threat of what he just might do was apparently enough, a quietly intimidating guy, a soft speaker who meant business, a New York City police detective, Missing Persons if I'm not mistaken. Horse told us a classic little story about his father illustrating the relationship. When he mentioned the idea of getting a tattoo, *père* calmly turned to him, *deadpan* and said: "*whatever limb you have tattooed will be removed,*" so, Walt never got the tattoo. He didn't dare. And Walt was secretive. You were never allowed to ask and he would never actually say where he was from before moving to the Rock in high school, what his father actually did for a living, how many kids were in his family, what his religion was, nothing. *Classified*, everything, and you didn't have clearance. *Why do you want to know?* He'd respond, like a *bona fide* Secret Squirrel cartoon character, a real man from U.N.C.L.E., like he was Napoleon Solo in person, keeping secrets that no one really

cared anything about except to make him bug out and watch as he retreated into stubborn, baseless, paranoia. We never understood exactly what his problem was, but whatever it was? It was funny, and only served as grounds for more teenage derision and laughter. I'm only reporting what leaked out. We'd goof on him a lot about that, like when we'd get to a part in a conversation that would lead to a subject that we knew Walt would go classified on us about, like whether his sister went to a certain school or not, why his mother was so never around, closed behind her bedroom door whenever we were there, or what kinda' dog food he fed his mean, blonde, German Shepherd named Duchess that had to be locked in the basement whenever any of us came over, or some other ordinary mundane fact of life that no one really gave a shit about, clearing our throats, roll our eyes and do our *Mission Impossible* theme-song parodies, you know, about exploding tapes and disavowing any knowledge of anything, etc. In spite of all that, Walter would not relent and a secret would stay a secret. There seemed like something dark, perhaps even unspeakable lurked about there, but he didn't budge. Not a centimeter. He knew that after a while we would stop asking and the proper security level would be maintained. Sometimes we'd catch Horse *père* returning home from work, off the Long Island Rail Road, with his tall, trim, quiet and unsmiling, turtle-necked and blazered figure in measured striding, paper under arm, to his quiet, clean, unsmiling house in the suburbs. He was the man in the *Silva Thins* add, James Coburn in the flesh with a real gun, charcoal-gray light hair and dark, dark unsmiling eyes. We didn't fuck around in front of Walt's father. We were good boys then. He knew better of course, but at home he wasn't on the job and we were his son's friends, but still, we always kept a polite distance just in case, like with Duchess. The slamming part though, violence? That's where that kinda' meanness comes from, it gets passed along from person to person, father to son, brother to brother, like a bad, chronic cold and lucky or not for him, Walt didn't have it in him, until the one known time he did, 'nother story for another time, the incident involved a swinging belt-buckle and ended with a broken wrist, Scar's, his best friend. Another thing I loved about Walt was

his sense for music, he knew it and knew it deep. Walt blazed the way, while we listened to top forty and "A" tracks he knew the deep cuts and bands, the really, really great ones like A Beautiful Day, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Genya Ravan, Velvet Underground and like who played which instrument on Derek and the Dominos anthemic masterpiece *Layla* and the Allman Brothers *Blue Skies*, was it *Duane* or *Greg* or *Dickie* or *Eric*? He knew. He could hear it and point it out for us. Like when Horse would extract and repeat a lyric, even a mundane one like *Yes's* Long Distance Runaround "*I still remember the dream there*" it would then register as profound, as if it were the first time hearing it, so much deeper and more compelling than it sounded before he highlighted it. He got it, even though doubtful, perhaps the two Yes masterpieces, *Tales From the Topographic Ocean* and *Close to the Edge,* that no one gets lyrics-wise. I loved him for that. Music. Music, those albums were life-saving hymns to me, and Walt was the much-revered minister. No jokes needed.

Nothing was more important to us than the *now*. Kinda' Zen like to think of it – the best and the brightest of South Side High School, the masterminds. Not an athlete, artist, or a scholar among us. Not even a contender or wannabee. No ambition besides the next joke, drink or hit of weed, zero, none. Washouts at the starting gate, burnouts, losers, called it quits early, went to work stocking shelves at Sears, too cool to take life seriously, badly in need of skin care and haircuts. Not boring though, the fun part, the risk taking, the rebellion, the fights, if you can sustain it at least until draft age. It was the *sex, drugs and rock'n roll* crowd on the cheap. Ninety-nine cent six packs of warm bottles of *Knickerbocker* beer from the local distributor and five-dollar nickel-bags split three or four ways on cold winter mornings, scouring the parking lot in search of an unlocked car to use as a temporary, conveniently located opium den. No respect. Just take. Finding an unattended vehicle unlocked we'd open it and invite ourselves in, Bobby McQueen-style, making ourselves comfortable while checking out the tape deck and glove compartment for whatever we might want to help ourselves to, three

or four of us and smoke until broke an entire and complete nickel bag before Home Room at 8 AM. That's a 1974 style nickel bag, a big, fat, fistful of dope. Thick, white pungent smoke would fill the car like a steam bath so we'd have to leave a window cracked open and endure the stoned cold chill of the mid winter air just to be able to breath a little oxygen along with the burning cannabis. We'd do it up whole before class and then float from the car through the

The terror of South Side Jr. Hi. 1971, second from left first row

parking lot, through the hallowed hallways of school on a hippie high, Lou Reed cloud of a dream. Other kids got involved with scholastics and sports, or *artsy-fartsy* stuff, doing their things, we knew better. Bouncing on lightness, joy, and sweet craving air we'd *Take a Walk on the Wild Side* to the "colored girls" beat. Everybody was an asshole except me and my pals. It was great. Not exactly up to my father's fondest wishes, the Senior Art Editor of the NYU yearbook, another phony big-deal, or my blessed grandmother's who would call us the *Phi Beta Kappas* or the "*good time Charlies,*" but this was me and I didn't care what anybody thought, this was my time to be young, wild, rebellious and free. *Live and Let Die!* Still, Mom-Mom, who called me *Bobby*, also knew how to call a spade a spade and never hesitated to, she'd label people "*me go to parties,"*

a quote she recalled to describe a certain, brainless, carefree type, the friends I chose, *lowlifes* she'd say – the guys I wanted to fit in with only edgier, more like *me go to parties and later rob your house* - and my dad? Well, he split the scene just when the real fun began anyway so later for him. *Good riddance, daddy-o.* Now let us smoke.

"I'm doing fine - on cloud nine"- (Norman Whitfield & Barrett Strong)

Every morning as the regular tribe of lost, wannabe savages congregated around that weather-worn picnic table near the fence at the edge of the school, we might also on occasion catch a decent, school-yard fist fight. Once, besides the one or two or three forgotten others I had there myself, was the time I was so stoned and high on booze bloated ego I smacked *Big Billy Baur* in his big football-playin' mug, the crack so loud and harsh it reported all over the parking lot causing stares and snickers from many of the surprised but undisturbed witnesses. Why he didn't pulverize me right then and there I'll never know, he coulda' swallowed me in one gulp, probably the same reason he let other people fight his fights for him like I did years before and took an ass whoopin', saved all his bravura for the ball field I guess and maybe he may have remembered somewhere between the deep, gray folds of line-backer, battered brain hidden beneath his thick white skull that I owed him one from that other fistfight, the one I fought on his behalf a long time before, back in grade school on the lawn of the Rec Center where I got my ass kicked by the original and authentic *Arthur Fonzarelli*, the local legend *Louie Monteforte* who had initially targeted Bauer for a beating due to some type of insult or other petty transgression. Louie was the real *Fonz* only not cute and funny like on the TV show, instead rather a quieter, cooler, meaner and more dangerous, but just as charismatic kid – totally without trying *and* in real life. For example, the time Scar mentioned that word was out: "*Louie's* having a party at the beach!" which meant

nothing more than Louie's declaration that it be so, it wasn't his beach and he'd be supplying nothing, not booze, not broads, not weed, not even transportation, but none of that mattered, it was simply and solely his declaration, and so be it, *Louie's party* at the beach. We laughed, but it was true. And just maybe off the football field *Big Billy* was just plain chicken. I volunteered on his behalf to fight the legendary, charismatic little *toughguy* in order, I told myself, as only a thirteen year old could, to "save" Billy from being "killed" by Louie. *Louie's gonna kill him* ran the rumor. The kids believed Louie to be capable of murder, maybe he was and maybe not, no one really knew, but the risk either way was certain. The assumption was that Louie wouldn't *kill* me, maim me maybe, but *kill* me? No. And why not? `Cause young Kabbo was only a surrogate, a proxy who stepped up on Billy's behalf and as such – Louie in his role as the aggrieved predator would cut me a measure of slack. More about alpha Louie later and the second of our two brawls but for now, Billy had a smack, hard in the mug coming, not for letting me fight his fight for him or for me getting my butt whipped in my zeal to prove myself and volunteered, though Billy was big enough and athletic enough to have swallowed bad-guy Louie, about my size whole, dangerous as he may have been, but for Billy's ill-considered and ungrateful comment later. He never even stuck around to witness the very public brawl on the front lawn of the Rec in front of the gathered dozens of school kids to at least have my back should things get *out-of-hand* – as in jumped by more than one opponent should I unexpectedly gain the upper hand or whatever and so it got back to me, and my lumps, later on that when asked by witnesses *why and where he disappeared to* during the main-event altercation responded that his presence wasn't necessary because "*it was Kabbo's fight.*" I was a chump. A lumped up chump. He should have had the character to at least witness his noble squire's combat, in a sense though he was right, I butted in and the gods only know really why `cause I sure don't, grandiosity, ego, real sympathy, adrenaline Jones, *hero/rescue* genes, whatever, but Billy had no honor and Louie didn't care, he just wanted to fight

somebody. Louie loved to fight, the ham fisted *son-of-a-mason* could really scrap and he was ornery enough to want to often and often he did, so though it was Billy and not I who must have offended his honor with an insulting remark or gesture, thus offering him the pretext for his next brawl, a brawl he would get, and this ornery *son-of-a-bully who got bullied,* also no stranger to the lure of a good scrap got a chance to try that little hooligan and his reputation on for size, which got me my head kicked in, but the kids? Well, they were surprised and even a little impressed that someone new from out-of-town had the gonads to stand up to the legendary *roughneck* and town terror at all, few did and I even had him down in the beginning before letting myself get *psyched-out* and dazed by a few quick punches to the head. It happens. But *my* fight? Now my honor was offended. My bruises? Yeah, mine, but my fight? I should have been thanked and respected, not dismissed as if I was the fool, which in fact after hearing of his words now felt like. So, Billy had a crack coming from this *foolish surrogate* and one day in the school parking lot, without warning or other apparent more recent provocation, years later he got it, an openhanded c*rack* to his stupid-ass mug! Account closed. That Simple Simon event aside, and as already reported, a few days earlier there was a real high-school brawl.

Sometime around the beginning of school, early September ‘74 may have even been the first day or two of the semester, exhilarating drama unfolded in the parking lot dubbed “Fireman’s Field” at South Side High School in Rockville Fucking Center. First, a little background info: in good ol’ middle, middle-class suburbia, at least back in the early seventies we didn’t have street gangs like in Spanish Harlem or even closer to home Rockaway, Queens *per se*. We had the watered down version of adolescent *toughguy* camaraderie called *fraternities*. Modeled loosely on the college frat scene these high-school boys would group together in bands associating themselves by “colors” and Greek letters. Really they were self-assembled into groups by social class and preferences for either sports or automobiles. The sport guys, the “*jocks*” joined the

Alpha Omega Theta, or the *Omega Gamma Delta* crew, black and gold or red and green respectively while my preference, the grease monkey, blue-collar, car-lovin' kids joined *Alpha Theta Chi*, colored black and purple. On the walls of brick alleys and service station Men's rooms you could see the battle for turf played out with spray cans proclaiming "*Chi rules*" or "*Omega sucks*" or "*Oceanside Chi – Filthy Five*" and this or that does or doesn't do that or the other thing. I always wondered, *rules* what? The Men's room? The brick alley? Rules who? Me? I was only once "asked" (a formal invitation hand delivered by letter printed on frat stationary) to come down to the weekly clubhouse meeting for an initial interview, like it was a big honor (*sorta' was*) by my close neighborhood brother and pal, *Espo*, but after a single trial shot to the butt with a wooden paddle (at my request, as a test, a big part of their *Hell Night* finale ritual after a month of tie-wearing, slap fighting, butt-kissing, *dogging*) decided *forget this shit* `cause that was fuck'n painful and they would lay on dozens and I never really cared to join any of these groups of boys that much anyway, didn't need that kinda' restricting backup so contented myself to remain apart and together with the more loosely affiliated others, the meaner and lonelier lost wannabes that remained apart and alone together like us Hollywood inspired picnic-table *Droogs* or another closely related group, the *river rats* from the other side of town. Instead of colors and letters, we wore these long, knee-length, heavy, woolen green WWI army surplus overcoats, thick and warm with very deep pockets. Deep enough to stash a half-ounce of weed in and not be discovered by a cop's searching hand, it happened. To add to the Droog-like, uniform couture I carried a thick, wooden walking cane with a taped up handle for easy handling as a threat, more like Alex's than McQueen's, or in case it was ever actually needed for battle, but never was. My fists and feet were always sufficient. Seriously, all my fights were using fists or threats backed up by weapons up to then, but you never knew, someone just might call my bluff, then what? Either way, for sure it was a *bona fide* wild card. We liked our sex, drugs and rock'n roll straight up, didn't need formal associations with a lot of rules to feel accepted or have our backs.

We had our own backs and weren't accepted as mainstream by conforming do-gooders and didn't waste much time tryin' to change it. Espo my sponsor, having completed the rituals, the interview, dogging and hell-night, himself was officially in and officially out about like in a week or so – not for him either, a real outsider's outsider Espo was who one night suddenly shaved his head baby-ass bald but left thick, hairy, mutton-chop sideburns, got a Marine Corp tattoo like his dad's, drove a home-made *dune-buggy* and told everyone he was a Vietnam vet nicknamed *Pretzels.* While he did enlist, the war was mostly over by then and he barely made it through Parris Island, if at all, and as a *reserve* never set foot anywhere overseas, but we were blood brothers too, and tight pals anyway, even after I bloodied his kid brother Mickey's nose for calling me a "dirty Jew" in their backyard, above-ground, blue-collar swimming pool. I stuck up for him in a few fights – again volunteering to stand up for our side after he *pussed-out* against another gang's leader. We were outnumbered in the Fireman's Field backwoods by about ten or fifteen kids from the next town to five or six of us that day, me almost choking to death the one who squared off against me – had to be pulled off him by several others from both sides once I got him down and my hands around his neck, his face turning deep red and head swelling to twice its normal size, it seemed. I had no intention of letting go. All this on his behalf and our group's honor, aside from the fact that Espo kicked my ass once or twice himself, once in revenge for bloodying his brother. He was actually a bit tougher than me physically, stronger and maybe a better fighter, cooler too with his own crazy style, a good looking kid of proud, working-class Neapolitan stock and an Irish-Catholic mother whose immigrant family survived the great potato famine, but he didn't always act it which is why I so often felt the need to step in on his behalf. Didn't matter. Brothers are like that sometimes, even neighborhood blood brothers.

Another time we were playing *wreak havoc* on a Halloween night, about twenty or thirty of us junior high monsters, twelve and thirteen year olds, lining up outside random people's houses where

one of us would ring the door bell – "*trick or treat*" then quickly exit the coming *line-of-fire* once the door opened when we'd commence pelting the unsuspecting inhabitant with a firing squad of raw eggs. That's was how you celebrate Halloween. Hysterical, fantastic. *Boom-crash-splat!* We'd also target moving cars regardless of the inhabitants or driver, it was the one night a year when everyone was fair game. Hitting one particular moving auto resulted in the sudden slamming of brakes, screeching of tires and the opening of the front doors where the driver, a high-school kid of about seventeen and his crony rushed out to attack the *eggers* who as planned took off in different directions when those predictable alarms sounded. Running and getting away was part of the fun, it was expected. I was right behind Espo as we dashed through backyards to get away with the car's occupants in hot-pursuit by foot right behind. As soon as Espo hit the first tall backyard fence and began the climb to hop it the driver, an ugly rat of a guy named George Loss swung a golf club he was armed with at Pat's head shattering his jaw. As Espo lay on the ground in shock, moaning, Loss momentarily retreated to the still running car and a few of us kids stopped running to gather around our wounded comrade to see the damage and lend some kind of support which was when Kabbo could be heard vowing: "*If I ever see this guy again I'm gonna kick his ass*" – and guess what? No sooner did these bold and boastful words come out of my mouth when the golfer and his crony, a guy named Eddy Orick who Jimmy fought once or twice to a draw, another much older kid, suddenly reappeared in our midst which was my cue to put deed to word. So we began banging, me to him, him putting me on the ground almost right away but as soon as he was about to start pummeling my face with his fists with me trying to wrestle away while bracing for the incoming before the first blow was struck two black leather work boots with metal cleats appeared at our heads accompanied by the quiet but certain command "*get off him.*" We both looked up to see who it was then when Georgie-boy recognized the solid, compact and serious young man abruptly stopped, let go and we both got back up on our feet. It was Louie protecting one of his own being both sheepdog and wolf. Loss though? All classic coward, only

play-acting *toughguy* with much younger kids when armed but against guys with real steel balls like Louie Monterforte? That was another story. Case closed. He bitched right up as is the coward's way. But Loss and Espo's broken jaw? That I still remember even if Patrick chose to forgive and forget, Kabbo hasn't.

Espo's father, on the other hand, was a real five-alarmer who looked like a cross between *Anthony Quinn* and *Rocky Marciano*, a New York City fireman with an electric garage door installation business on the side and did alright for a rough, blue-collar guy without much formal education, but probably mimicking his own upbringing or whatever the reason put enough fear into his young son's heart to likely last a lifetime. When we heard him calling "Paaa-*trick!* " out the front door the whole neighborhood of boys went on alert. It wasn't a question, *Patrick? Where are you?* It was a command: *Patrick - here - now*. So Espo too could only act brave when he knew he could score, but whenever there was doubt? He'd puss-the-fuck out like he did that day in the woods, leaving it to me, Mr. Nit-Wit "dirty-Jew" blood-brother the volunteer to step in. So, as far as joining the frats? My clique of inveterate outsiders generally passed. We gloried in our alienation even from each other so *fuck you* and *you too*, get it? If however I had any particular fondness it was most definitely for the black and purple Italian and German-Irish *Chi* frat, the blue-collar, mixed-breed-mutts with a rare black dude (a tall Afro-wearin' dude who was plenty tough from the next town and friendly enough with whites named Gyle) and Jew (yeah, Alpha Romeo Aaronson, generous Jeff the bully who they made *Sergeant at Arms and* was tough enough but more importantly had a built-in swimming pool). Wild times there, we'd party in his huge house, near Jimmy's and Hannibal's for days at a time, hung out and tripped unmolested, and where Fondue sought refuge, even moving in for a while *and* that Alpha Romeo to cruise around and be seen in. Yeah, it was generous Jeffrey, the sometimes bully we used to taunt by calling out to him "*strong like bull*" in our affected Russian accents 'cause he could curl 50 lbs with one hand at just sixteen. Yup, *Chi* had spots for outsiders, the "*greasers"* as they were known

– right out of East of Eden, *Alpha Theta Chi*. They mostly all had uncool short hair (an official requirement), rough guy Lee Marvin mugs, didn't smoke pot and like their role models the *Hells Angels* supported the war in *Vietnam*. With that they were purposely uncool which meant basically had nothing to offer me except the thrill of the promise that they might in fact actually be dangerous, bark and bight hard when provoked. One night, the chapter president, another Patrick, this one a fearless and natural hero-type rush into action when word of a *Chi* brawl down at the Rec reached him, me a punk kid, tag-along with a crew of motley messengers and will never forget the unquestioned immediacy of his response to the *call-to-arms*, a club president indeed jumping at the word, rushing to lace up his sneakers and fly to the action. *That* and what seemed to me their general rejection of suburban values and defiant antisocial posturing, antiheros compared to those other conforming jock frats is what I liked. They were mean looking and casually unpretty and had some members who actually went to jail and not for stock fraud or resisting the draft either. Their members quit school and enlisted and usually in the Marines – you know, the *death before dishonor* crowd, or so they'd say. If you're gonna play *badass*, I always felt, play it to make it real, live it – that is, don't cop out with this sports shit and secret handshakes, kissing football coaches' asses like those other clowns who played at being bad but really went right along with the grownup's program of graduating school, getting Wall Street jobs and settling down obediently like their parents had, *morning regularity*. *Fuck all that*, this was still the time of revolution, just past the *Age of Aquarius* and the otherwise pitiful *greasers* came closest to that idea for me. They hated everybody and so did I – plus I'd seen some big fights before and the *Chi* guys seemed to make the most the show. They got the award for best costumes, props and music – throwbacks to the DA hairstyles of the *Fifties* in the longhaired and side-burns *seventies – Duke of Fucking Earl.* Mean looking girls around them too, like the one out east whose boyfriend I put the fear of a bloody death in. Really. That's why I say *pitiful*, chicks make or break guys. Louie, by the way had them all, all the foxiest young ladies, each by turn, that's who he

was, a steady *alpha male* where Kabbo was at best an aspiring beta with occasional moments of transcendent alpha elevation – at least that was how it mostly felt. Others saw me differently, as cocky, dangerous, self-assured or full of shit, but either way closer to the top – or bottom – than I usually felt hence the nickname they, not I attached, *Kabbo,* sounding a bit more like the guys that took my father's lunch money than the guy *Boris Julius* they took it from. Suits me. Anyway, the Chi guys, though only aspiring *betas* themselves had some respect from me so I was really let down that day when in front of the entire school they allowed themselves to get beat down and humiliated by the not wannabe but real *toughguy* black kids, *brotha's* who would have shoved Bobby McQueen's cane up his ass sideways for laughs. *Asses kicked!* Shamed and beaten, an end to the legend, no more *Chi rules* or glory for black and purple. A sad day for greasers and greaser fans everywhere, and this is how it went.

The Fight

You see, there was this other group of students, black kids that hung-out sort of unofficially led by the Smiths, a family of legendary athletes, basketball stars covering nearly every grade from seniors that had graduated down to junior high*ers* – there was Otis, "Beaver," Jeff and, Chucky. These were the Smiths of my generation. Though these boys weren't bullies they were not to be messed with, a whole family of straight up alpha males. They were quiet, at least at school; they didn't have to say much, letting their actions speak for them, on and off court. The prettiest girls went with them, white and black, each partner of the couple enjoying their own respective trophies. That pissed a lot of people off. *Me?* I couldn't have gave a shit less. I wasn't fucking any of these girls nor was I about to, well except maybe one, Diane Rubenstien, a beautiful Jewish cheerleader chick who went with Chucky for a while but still gave me some attention on the sly. In general though? They weren't interested in me so what did I care beyond that? I

didn't. Diane liked me, and it was clear how really fine she was but it was all about Sherry after my sophomore year so yeah, I noticed, but remained basically unfazed, so in the grip of *you-know-who* I lived and could only half-heartedly respond, if at all. All the other women in the world looked like leftover potato salad to me. Dull. No *eros*. The only direct contact I ever had with any of the Smiths was the time in the Boy's Room in eighth or ninth grade when I confronted a fellow classmate who allegedly made a favorable remark about Hitler. Kabbo was the *go to* guy for Jewish kids who wanted their honor defended – by some one else mind you, and once again – true to my screwy DNA was a willing volunteer. That day I confronted the rather large fellow, a jock, probably football with an open pocketknife, a poor man's weapon, all the bad boys carried them, black *007*s, black and gold *Leopards*, a few others of different names and logos but similar styles, sharp looking and dangerous items you could buy for a few bucks in Times Square or by the bus station in Hempstead and this kid was the first but not last to face me with an open and menacing blade. He was quick to apologize; stammering, pale, as I already had a well-earned and growing reputation for reckless disregard. While the other boys watched in mesmerized silence, maybe four or five of them, Chucky among them encouraged me quietly, almost a whisper from just above and behind: "*cut him Kabbo*. *Cut him*." I never did. The apology was good enough, but the threat? That was real and I didn't need to impress the Smith kid that badly, not really at all, jocks never impressed me, just the "*Hitler was right*" badmouthed guy, he needed a warning and a lesson in overstepping and consequences. Anyhow, the big showdown between the Smiths and their pals against the frat boys of Alpha Theta Chi, well that caught mine and everybody else's attention that early afternoon when for one exquisitely dramatic moment life took me out of myself.

There's something about the crisp, cool, snap of the fresh autumn air that always reminds me of school; of new beginnings and now, of old times and friends. Well, this new beginning began in the parking lot, like I said, where aside the ball fields, the real action happened

at South Side Senior High. The broader layout was the parking lot centered between the two roughly ten acres of grassy park and tall trees of Fireman's Field. At one edge was a long blacktop runway, purpose of which was the training, exercising and entertaining of RVC's volunteer fire department, their friends, fans and families. It was probably a hundred yard straight drag strip crowned by an eighteen-foot high concrete and red brick arch where the trusty engine companies would regularly and competitively practice their running, climbing, and rescue routines. Today however, it was used as a drag strip for the Chi boys to show off their beefed-up hotrods, flexing their motorized muscles and so state their dominating presence in a very visual and spectacular manner. Racing up and down and back again from the start of the track to its end, they left a trail of dusty smoke and noise that no one in the school could miss or not hear. Each time they'd round a corner with their two or three car convoy, on the return trip they'd come closer and closer to the edge where a group of the black students gathered, taunting, almost menacing them with their heavy, loud machines, screeching tires and fuming exhausts. But *the brothers*, who were otherwise minding their own business, shooting the breeze, and enjoying the warmth of the slowly fading September sun eventually had enough. Someone threw a stone.

Frankie Jackson was the tall, lean, DA'd, president of the South Hempstead chapter of Alpha Theta Chi – and somehow – though technically not an RVC*er* he attended our high-school, at least until that day he did. As the leader of the blue-collar frat boy gang it was his call to slam the car breaks and bounce out of the driver's seat towards the abyss demanding to know who threw it, repeating, "*I said who threw it?*" It was about 3 PM and most of the classes were letting out so the parking lot was quickly filling with excited students sensing the rising dramatic tension of the suddenly brewing confrontation. The *brothers* were milling about with their girls in the close corner of the lot from where, apparently, it had been thrown at the windshield of the leading Chi car at full throttle. Frankie thunders up on foot up to confront the gathered group of Smiths and

their loyal acolytes, not the ordinary, everyday rank and file, school-boy black kids who played basketball and did their homework or cut class to play cards with us in the back of the park and had with their own form of fraternity, the windbreaker wearing *Together Brothers* but the real South Side *badass* black kids, not as like in Bobby McQueen criminal *badass,* more like as in grown men among boys *badasses* who wasted not a moment nor a word in showing their disdain for the tough-talking *white boy* with the temerity to challenge and provoke them so loudly so publicly. Two of the Smiths and one other grabbed him by the waist, shoulders and legs and lifted him off the ground, turned him horizontal as though they'd rehearsed it and knew exactly what to do, then began using him as a battering ram, head first, smashing the Chi president against the frame of his own car door and fender again and again until blood began to flow from a split in his forehead just below the hairline. Now his brothers had to act, so after a sputtering pause, a pasty, white, low key and thin Marty Muller and a muscular, middle-weighted, dark haired and acned brute exited their autos and tentatively made their way into the mêlée only to be stopped dead in their tracks by Gus Cruz (another cool name), a middle-weighted, light-skinned brother who wore an earring through his nose, a gold ring pierced his left nostril, *sui generis* back in '74 and a statement of its own: I don't follow the pack – I lead it. Gus grabs Muller by the T-shirt neck and shouts, "You want some too?" And before Marty can even think what to say Gus takes the cheap cotton material with both hands and in one downward stroke tears it right in half down the center – so fast is this action that Muller changed his mind before he even made it and it was over for him, all the greaser *Chi rules* bravado displayed so regularly in spray pant on alley walls gone, and the other, beefier *greaser?* Well, witnessing the ugly drama in front of him he just plain faded back, literally dissolved phantom-like into the larger crowd as if he'd never even been there. What the hell were all the push-ups, scowls and baseball bats hidden beneath car seats for if you weren't gonna use'm when your buddy, your club president was getting bloodied and thumped three on one? Meanwhile as the Smith crew continued to batter

Jackson's head into the car door, the blond haired greaser chicks emerged from the sidelines to enter the fray and who besides Jackson were the only other white folks on scene to show any heart that day at all and they, the two or three of them were met by several angry soul sisters who were not about to pass on an opportunity to let off some steam against girls they probably always resented, probably the hair, can't be the bods – *hell no* – gota' be the hair, so the scratching, hair pulling, cussing and the gnashing and spewing gained momentum as the crowd of gawking, student onlookers thickened. Chi hadn't a lot of friends outside their clique anyway; they'd rather fix cars than catch balls or get grades, black or white, they didn't even smoke pot, so no one else jumped in, especially not against the Smiths. We were all now seeing who was parking lot boss at South Side High School, who would be setting trends and in what direction and who would not be, from that time forward.

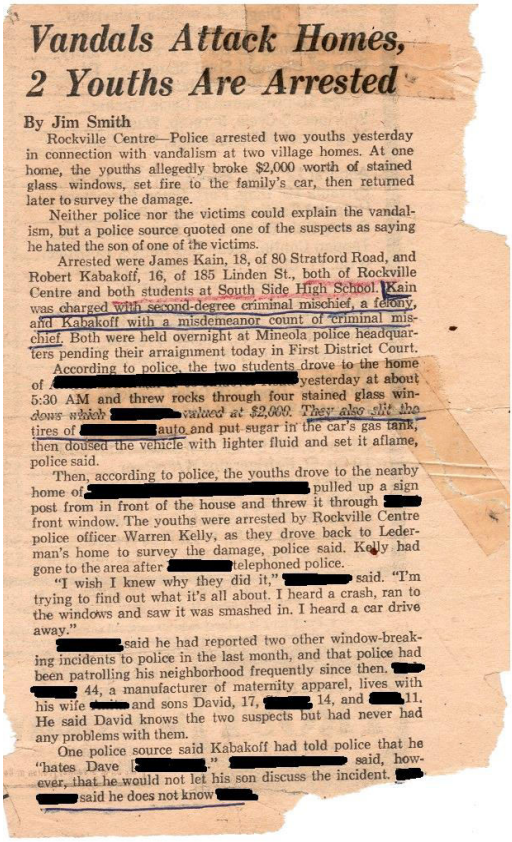
As the two or three RVCPD squad cars quickly showed up and the men in blue took the raging Frankie away he shouted, bleeding but unbowed, pulling a still hidden knife from somewhere and thrusting it high into the air swore "[it would be] like the Ku Klux Klan here!" when he returned, which he never did. That was the end of the rule of Alpha Theta Chi at our school, not even the bathroom walls, it was now a joke, *full of sound and fury,* as they say, *signifying nothing*, and at the very end, Jackson's last rueful threat proved empty, closing the greaser era with an impotent whimper, despite Frankie's final roar. Hence, we were forced to witness the beginning of the dominance of *African-American* culture there, a development I never quite warmed up to. As far as that was concerned, blacks made great contributions to the wider American culture, it's a long list of who, how, what, when and why: Attucks, Douglas, Ellington, Satchmo, King, Robeson and Miles, Tubman, Ella, Baker and Holiday, Wright and Baldwin, and of course sports heroes like Cassius Clay, Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson have to be named as prominent examples of those rightly held in the highest regard, but much of "white" culture, if there even is such a thing, the term only exists as a semantic contradistinction to "*black*"

or *nonwhite* culture, is also often quite great, the titans shaping most of western civilization as we know it, the good and the bad, the written word to the moon landing, the major headliners Aristotle, Shakespeare, Da Vinci and Einstein, to the modern icons like the Beatles and the Founding Fathers, so, I'm not at all in favor of one obscuring or dominating another. I like a healthy mix and eclectic gathering of the best of all, that's what suits me, in that sense I'm a true New Yorker, an American in the best sense, even while stuck in the TV headed, train-station to nowhere suburbs. But that's what happened after the brawl in Fireman's Field that day, gradually, even the *cool* white kids started talking and acting "black" – smoking *Kools* and listening to *Earth, Wind and Fire* and the hip white wannabees like KC and the Sunshine Band – *gimme a break here!* Let's be who we are – and improve on what we got, not vainly attempt to trade it in for something we're not, were never meant to be and can't possibly achieve, it only makes you look foolishly weak, second rate, real *beta,* except for on the rare occasion when it can be really pulled off like with a Jerry Lee Lewis, the Righteous Brothers or the Young Rascals, those white boys could really bring it, but I didn't warm to that either all that much back in those lost days. I was still a wannabee hippie and fan of Woodstock Nation, with for added color the black folk there, like Richie Havens, Sly and the Family Stone, the Chambers Brothers and of course the late, great Jimi Hendrix. How degraded and embarrassing it all seemed, trying to be what you ain't `cause you're scared or envious or both, especially after all the pretty sixties talk about *give peace a chance, ban the bomb, brotherhood, flower-power, equality, make love not war*, the phrases that were supposed to characterize the zeitgeist of the era even for us kids, only children in the Age of Aquarius, now teenagers in the age of the Partridge Family retrograde seventies. In the end, like with every generation before us, it was still mostly the raw power of brute force and physical violence people respected and so set the pace and direction for what was or was not hip at South Side High from then on, the day when the actual world of the parking lot substituted for the theoretical world of the classroom.

The Crime

It was my usual late night crew that fateful event beginning at the Rainbow Diner, the four of us, me, Scarborough, Jimmy and Horsehead. Like I said, none of us were good in sports or the arts, not interested either, school was boring so instead it was our *regular*, the relentless but near hopeless quest for female companionship, music, driving around and getting buzzed. We could all do that. Mostly though in the opposite order. All of us the first born sons, all on our merry ways, laughing, drunk and stoned out loud, rude and loving it, drinking our coffees when the table's sugar packets caught my eye, inspiring a divine Dominos revelation. Without pause for reflection, I proposed to the other three that we go over Perkin's house and pour a little sugar into the gas tank of his big ol' luxury car, the family spare he drove to school and about town with. Nothing too extreme but quiet, effective and to the point. Fuck up his wheels. That is the point of him having a car and me not. That would fix that – now we both don't have cars, and about the *girlfriend* comment? I'd get around to that too, but for now the plan as stated was agreed to unanimously and immediately. Dave was nobody's favorite, a spoiled, arrogant, punk and another firstborn son of a manufacturer from the *uppity-upper* class part of Rockville Fucking Center. Ladies undergarments, I read. Whatever. I knew the *douchebag* all the way back to junior high, my first year in public school three years or so before in eighth grade when he was in ninth, we met by semi-purposely colliding on the landing between floors, the second and third, he was coming down, me heading up – him knocking the books out of my hands and we fought. I don't remember who won or if it was broken up too early to call, probably a draw, but that's how we met and it was predictably rocky ever since. Sometimes we'd be friends though – like when he gave in to me about sharing the car or fronting me drugs, I needed to double-date with him just to take Sherry out in a car – never having one of my own, closest was my deep sleeping father's pale, green, Impala four-door, occasionally borrowed without bothering to ask, and musta' had a huge engine 'cause that

low-key lookin' baby really flew, just a quick, light tap to sixty in a thirty, so it was fun and worth the risk. A request though, would have been summarily turned down, as I had *no stinkin' license*, instead, sneaked the keys taking joy rides in the dead of night – but that wasn't a reliable way to take your girl out. No, that woulda' been another trip to the slammer, or emergency room, or worse. Other times with *chimpface?* Obviously not – so yeah, in my eyes he looked like a chimpanzee, *Chimpboy,* but he was still popular with some of the best looking girls in town, even Diane, they apparently mesmerized, me absolutely mystified by the power of cars, drugs and money, even in his case overcoming a glaringly simian appearance.



Vandals Attack Homes, 2 Youths Are Arrested

By Jim Smith

Rockville Centre—Police arrested two youths yesterday in connection with vandalism at two village homes. At one home, the youths allegedly broke $2,000 worth of stained glass windows, set fire to the family's car, then returned later to survey the damage.

Neither police nor the victims could explain the vandalism, but a police source quoted one of the suspects as saying he hated the son of one of the victims.

Arrested were James Kain, 18, of 80 Stratford Road, and Robert Kabakoff, 16, of 185 Linden St., both of Rockville Centre and both students at South Side High School. Kain was charged with second-degree criminal mischief, a felony, and Kabakoff with a misdemeanor count of criminal mischief. Both were held overnight at Mineola police headquarters pending their arraignment today in First District Court.

According to police, the two students drove to the home of [redacted] yesterday at about 5:30 AM and threw rocks through four stained glass windows which [redacted] valued at $2,000. They also slit the tires of [redacted] auto and put sugar in the car's gas tank, then doused the vehicle with lighter fluid and set it aflame, police said.

Then, according to police, the youths drove to the nearby home of [redacted] pulled up a sign post from in front of the house and threw it through [redacted] front window. The youths were arrested by Rockville Centre police officer Warren Kelly, as they drove back to Lederman's home to survey the damage, police said. Kelly had gone to the area after [redacted] telephoned police.

"I wish I knew why they did it," [redacted] said. "I'm trying to find out what it's all about. I heard a crash, ran to the windows and saw it was smashed in. I heard a car drive away."

[redacted] said he had reported two other window-breaking incidents to police in the last month, and that police had been patrolling his neighborhood frequently since then. [redacted] 44, a manufacturer of maternity apparel, lives with his wife [redacted] and sons David, 17, [redacted] 14, and [redacted] 11. He said David knows the two suspects but had never had any problems with them.

One police source said Kabakoff had told police that he "hates Dave [redacted]," [redacted] said, however, that he would not let his son discuss the incident. [redacted] said he does not know [redacted].

Tonight though, noticing those diner sugar packets I was gonna settle a few scores and even things up a little. First, he was so fucking stingy! He would sell me THC hits but use a razor to shave off the fine edges of these tiny little *kickass*, two-dollar pills, which were hard enough to get as it was, keeping the excess powder to himself! That's low. He never worked while I had to scrounge as a busboy at a local steakhouse or steal for my beer, weed and cigarette money while he always had money and made you beg and kiss his ass for crumbs, and now had the nerve to add insult to injury by lying and saying something so out of line about my girlfriend's looks it just begged for punishment. "*Kill me! Put me out of my chimpfaced misery!*" he might as well demanded, "kick my *fuck'n* chimpfaced ass!" by sayin' that stuff. Lying, *cheapass-cocksucker* was trying to provoke me, again, me, *Kabbo*. Did he just not care? Did he think he could out *bad* me? Was he that *fuck'n* nutso? *Musta' been swallowing too much of his own THC shavings,* I suspected. I didn't know and really didn't care but I'd make him care. Really. The fucking nerve, I should have finished him off on the stairwell, so *let's go! C'mon!* Commanded the sixteen year old, it's time to distribute some sorrow, into the car and over there – now to let off steam – my pain meets yours.

Exiting the diner and piling into Scar's car we began our short journey into the dark of the cool, early April night. It was always an issue, who would ride in the front, *shotgun,* a privilege to be fought over, indicating status usually settled by who got their hands on the front door handle first and stubbornly held on and then only after a verbal duel to wit you might hear such clever rhetorical gems as: "out of the front, *cunt!*" and "in the back, *crack!*" followed by an array of "in the rear, *queer!*"s and so on 'til somebody yells forcefully enough "*let's go!*" a couple of times, usually the driver and it'd be settled, when we'd be off running. Heading north at about 2 AM towards the fancier part of town, *Horsehead* from the back (he never made *shotgun*) made an abrupt announcement. He had to go home. What a fag! *Pussy!* Are you kidding? He always had to go home just when the fun (trouble) was ready to start. I

guess his sense of self preservation was still in good operating condition `cause he made the right call that time as things turned out. In retro his father would have severed both his limbs and likely his head too had he remained. You'll see. So, turning around we headed back to south RVC where the Thomas's had their little cookie-cutter house while braking his balls mercilessly without end all the way, just as friends are for. Sweet dreams, *Horsehead, you homo-pussy!* To which he'd cry out in raging, staccato, mock despair, "*buttocks! Buttocks! Buttocks!*"

Dropping him off, we headed north again and so were back on our fiendish ways and the mission. To tell you the truth, my reasons were obvious but don't exactly recall why Scar and Jimmy were so eager to help carry out the dastardly destruction plan. Bored, drunken, suburban delinquents, doing their painful things, nothing more, nothing less, we were all just getting kicks being self-absorbed and self-justifying bastards and so long as we thought we might get away with it mattered not the *who* or *why* – if there even was one, a *why* as long as there was a *who* and a *how*. Quietly driving up under the tree line's thick canopy of the upscale road, *Canterbury*, as they pretentiously called this area, we found *chimpface's* big machine parked peacefully on the driveway along side his house. Those luxury cars were like the size of small trucks, you could almost comfortably get laid in them – even live in them if necessary – well noted for future reference. We pulled up quietly just across the road from the Perkins' "stately Wayne Manor" and checked out the scene, noticing in detail what made this such a prime target for vandalizing. This house made Jimmy's, Jeff's, and Hannibal's look like one-room, log-cabins. Not that it was any bigger, or not much bigger, maybe not even at all it was just plain fancier and richer looking. Another English Tudor type with a manicured lawn and garden combined, two-car garage, carefully trimmed hedges and those expensive gothic style stained glass, leaded, windows. All this bourgeois *charm* beneath a gray slate roof with a big stone chimney up in front proclaiming stability, comfort and power. Those elegant, sturdy windows, letting light funnel in

through streams of warm color, I recalled peering out from behind them as an occasional guest in the house, feeling so elevated and aristocratic, like a conquering noble in medieval Europe looking down at his estate from the carpeted, warm, paneled comfort up above. Yeah, it was comfortable, but not inviting. "*Let them smoke hemp!"* The house was inset deeply from the street; so viewing it from the car gave the whole vision some depth and grand proportion. Tall trees with thick limbs surrounded the structure, framing it with the natural flowing beauty of age, strength, and rugged Maple majesty. Quiet prevailed. The whole neighborhood, the name Canterbury implying old English wealth was filled with Italian, Irish-Catholic, and Jewish second-generation *new money*. Everybody wants to be something they're not. Everybody needs a fantasy. I wanted to be respected. Well, really, loved, and most desperately by *you-know-who*. *Why must I be a teenager in love?* And if not loved, if I couldn't have that, then I'd settle for the next best things, hated and feared. At least that was respected, that I could have, fear masquerading as respect, my Machiavellian choice before even knowing who *The Prince* was, the bitter come by that naturally. Exiting Scar's trusty Cougar, me and Jimmy cautiously approached target number one, the *Oldsmobile* sedan, or a *Buick Electra*, not sure, anyway, not a teenager's kinda' car, but a car that rich grownups drive until, instead of getting rid of it, or giving it to the maid when it gets a little old, they gave it to their oldest kid to drive around and fender bender with 'til he graduated and was rewarded with a brand new TransAm for college, by then he'd know how to take care of something newer and more costly and in the meantime, use it for school, dates, family errands, showoff, selling THC, that kinda' crap. The gas tank cap was easy to spot and my sugar packets found themselves quickly torn open and the contents of about eight or ten of them silently spilled in. Rip, tear, pour, rip, tear, pour, repeat. Jimmy improvised busying himself by deflating and slashing the tires. Done. Next? It wasn't enough now. We felt unsatisfied. Scar emerged from the safety of the still running Cougar to join us in the project with a spray can in hand. What's he got in there? Who knew? But he said it was flammable. *Cool!* I liked fire.

Spraying a patch about two-foot square on the hood, somebody lit a match and the thing went up, just in the square, emitting a hot blue flame about a foot and a half high, crowned by flickering yellow fire. It burned for all of about thirty seconds, leaving a dark oily scorch mark on the high gloss finish but didn't spread. It was no Fourth of July but it whet our appetites for more. They had one of those plastic basketball nets hanging from the rim of the hoop mounted outside the front of the two-car garage, somebody lit that and we watched it melt as fiery drips made their sizzling way to the paved driveway below. Momentarily mesmerized we figured that was enough for now and it was time to split, so we got back in Scar's car and drove off. Somebody, probably me, had another idea. There was this other asshole, this other kid we could get, just on the other side of town. Another spoiled puke, Steve Cole. This part is hard to tell. I don't know what I had against this poor chap, truth is he was as gentle as a deer, long dark hair, soft brown eyes, played guitar, shared good pot, if he were a girl I woulda' fucked him, her, so I don't know why I had it in for him that night, again it was pretty cowardly of us but for some reason, he must have done or said something to piss me off, his name came up and we were on our way. Come to think of it? I know what it was: he was happy, secure and content and I wasn't, a kid from my background who had what I didn't have, by birthright, that's what I had against him, it was frustrated and belligerent *envy* – and he was an easy shot, not likely to seek revenge, which made him a perfect target. Gutless, me, we, I'll say it again – *beta* boys on the prowl. Driving east about ten minutes across town we circled the block of his considerably less grand home, the son of another make-believe doctor, a psychologist and his mom a guitar teacher, and planned the assault. Stopping the car a few yards away before we got out, again just me and Jimmy, approached the house on foot where in complete sync looked at each other, and without a word knew exactly what we'd do. There was a sturdy, wooden, signpost planted solidly on his front lawn with the doctor and guitar teacher shingles mounted on it. Together we grabbed the post at its base and in one uninterrupted, adrenaline soaked gesture pried it up from the ground and heaved it whole

through the living room bay window. We got a real charge out of that, the broken glass shattering the stillness of the quiet, suburban night ringing in our ears as we laughed running quickly back to the getaway car. Scar sped off and again, I don't know who, but someone (probably me, again, the sixteen year old commander) suggested we go back to the Perkins' to see if we'd gotten their attention. We wanted to see lights on and frantic commotion at the damage we'd done. That was gonna be the reward for our risk – proof positive that we made our point. Arriving back on the scene we drove innocently by only to be disappointed, finding the same peace and quiet that we left, nothing happened, no one scurrying about, not even a comfortable, Canterbury mouse. There was only one thing to do now. *More!* Parking his car in shadow this time, Scar joined us in the all out assault on the nobleman's compound. Picking up a child's tricycle discarded on their lawn, he lifted it overhead and heaved it at the car's front end. Catching it with the rubber tires on the windshield it bounced lamely off the thick glass then fell to the ground with a quiet thud. Nothing. Frustrated at our inability to wreak further havoc on the car, in a hurry and running out of patience we turned our attention once again to the house. Eyeing those lofty and imposing stained glass windows I picked up a heavy stone about the size of a golf ball and for all I was worth hurled it at an upper floor window. Now, I'm no quarterback or even little league pitcher but I can sure hit the side of a barn when properly motivated. Crack! *Bull's-eye!* The glass shattered. No more pretty *Canterbury* picture now. Following my lead, the stone selection and the throw, Jimmy the *Droog* plus Scar joined in. One, two, three more, their arms twisting back cocked and threw, crack! *Crack! Crack!* Firing off the well-aimed shots 'til a lot more fancy colored glass was now stained-glass window history, lead'n all. *Now*, like Oscar told Felix: *it was garbage*. There was no laughter this time. This would be heard, this would be felt, this would get someone's attention. I felt release. For one dark and unforgettable moment Dave would feel a little of what I felt all the time, unloved. By the third throw we saw lights turning on and hurried movement from within. More than a mouse was stirring. It was time to fly, *let's go!*

Back into the running car, slipping the shift into *Drive* and off. Quicker than quick down the block, around the corner and up the next quiet dark street we disappeared from view. It was all so easy, like a real life videogame, *Nightstrikers,* until we got really, really stupid, until the interference began – idiots, I mean *criminals* returning to the scene of the crime. *Proforma*.

The thing about Rockville Center is it's an incorporated village. That meant it had its own police department. And this is exactly the sort of activity they're hired to address: hooliganism, even homegrown hooligans destroying private property, taxpayer property, their property. That and traffic enforcement, not a heavy police beat, very few homicides or kidnappings, even fewer stickups so this was big excitement, a chance to do their jobs, something other than busting black kids for stealing bicycles or harassing local white teenagers at their hangouts for having too much fun drinking out of a Tango bottle and making happy noise. Adults weren't happy, so they didn't want us to be either, hiring men with guns and badges to enforce their imposed misery – we figured. Anyway, once again, we cruised around the block and back again to check things further out but this last trip was one way `cause by now there they were, under the lamplight in front of the house, RVC's finest, the police, as if waiting for us knuckleheads to return, as if they knew we would and not to disappoint, we did. Nailed. Busted. Caught. Two or three squad cars were called to the scene; responding, and we drove right into them. Well, not literally in to them but up to them, where before we knew it there was nowhere to run. It was like "*hello fellas, fancy meeting you guys here!*" [on this empty street, in the middle of the night, in front of a crime scene] only not funny. There was the self-conscious, half-hearted and obligatory attempt to play it off as if we were just passing through – coincidental but not connected to the crime. Not likely. No one drives through this street; people come or leave home on this street. Guilt was written all over our young mugs and we knew it. None of us were well-practiced criminals or professional politicians who can lie like it's the truth, at least not yet. Another scene of flashing lights and radios, calmly

talking police officers separating us and asking questions. I had that sinking, panicked but exhilarated feeling, the kind you get when you realize things have spun out of control, that you're no longer in command calling the plays and you're likely about to crash. Another odd combination, dread and relief, "*it's all over now, baby blue*," but that's what it was – I knew this meant trouble, real trouble this time. *Hold on* I heard myself say in the quiet of my mind, `cause *here goes*. It stopped being a video game. The police told us to follow them in our car down to headquarters so they could ask us some more questions. I'm not exactly sure when my "*hates Dave*" contribution came about or where it fits, but I do remember that during the car ride down to the precinct house we urgently swore each other to secrecy and concocted a story about our innocence and about having been "*just driving everyone home from a party*." It sounded pretty reasonable and probably would have held up too if our nerve had. Well, I kept to it. That is until about a half hour since we got there when a young detective came into the room they had me sitting alone in waving a piece of paper in his hand which he said was a *statement* made by Jimmy blaming it all on me, the oldest trick in the interrogation book. I fell for it, having calmed down, just about certain everything would be all right after telling them what they wanted to hear. *What's the big deal?* No one told us anything about getting, needing, or having a lawyer and the cops take full advantage of suspects too dumb and young to know. The Baldwin First Precinct house looks like a small, stone cottage, friendly, non-threatening, and familiar, the neighborhood police precinct, the place you come to when you lose your puppy or get locked our of your house when your parents aren't home. It seemed like things would end up *okay* here, no big-big deal, regardless of the fact of being cuffed to a steel desk and about to be charged with two felony counts of Criminal Mischief. *Criminal Mischief,* that's real bad mischief by the way, way beyond *Dennis the Menace* mischief but not quiet up to Charlie Manson mischief, midway between I'd say. Criminal Mischief, what an embarrassing name for a crime, something like what `ol Arlo felt that time with the "mother rapers and father stabbers" down on the ol' Group W bench for littering.

The "criminal" part's okay, *tough* and *mean, bad* and *dangerous* like *me* so that was cool but that *Dennis the Menace* "mischief" word's gota' go. So, I talked. It was a classic con, they're allowed to lie to extract a confession, they say. Anyway, with exactly zero savvy, as my tale tells, without a lawyer, little experience, and a powerful need to be understood, I bought the line hook and sinker. It wasn't all my fault, just mostly, so did exactly what the cop wanted me to do, told him my side of the story, distributing the blame fairly between all parties involved. Including, naturally, the victim's role too. He deserved it. That's probably when the line about hating Dave came up, using it as reasonable justification, "guilty with an explanation. You see your Honor, there are mitigating factors here, yeah, sure, I did it, but please understand, I hated the guy, and here are my reasons…" They probably pulled the same move on Jimmy, told him that I blamed it all on him. Now they had two confessions but with Scar, *who knows?* They let him go. Yeah. Never charged him. Somebody said one of them may have known his mother who worked for the big-deal county clerk or dated his sister and out of compassion or loyalty or privilege, whatever, they let him go. He was as guilty as we two. Maybe more, without his wheels we would never have gotten there and the deed would have gone undone. Why the desk sergeant and DAs ignored that is still a mystery. How could they write-up a report and leave out charging the diver? Wasn't there a second shooter on the grassy knoll? What? Well, that's life, sometimes you get a pass, other times you don't and it didn't seem it would have lightened mine or Jimmy's burden any to have him charged along with us, so, it was just as well he was spared the bullshit anyway, I guess. At least that was how it seemed then. And what bullshit it turned out to be, at least for me, not having a clue what was in store yet. Had I? I'd'a been a bit more panicked and a little less eager to talk down at Baldwin's friendly First Precinct house. If I'd'a kept my mouth shut I mighta' been seen as the sixteen year old being brought along in a car by two eighteen year olds and maybe let off the hook in consideration of that, like shoulda' happened at that summer camp. At this point though, after making my statement I felt pretty safe and sure that shortly after all

the Sergeant Friday Dragnet crap was over I'd be uncuffed and on my way home with my parents and out partyin' or with Sherry the next night. Not quite. No. Not quite. What started out as a video game on slow speed was about to become a video nightmare on autopilot with no controls to play with or adjustments to make, just fear, pain and danger, live and in 3D, compounded continuously for the next brutal, frightening, degrading and dangerous thirty days.

Jail

The live time closed circuit TV camera screeched and clanked noisily with merciless regularity, up and down, back and forth, rolling across the greaseless metal track that ran parallel to and hung from the ceiling just outside and above the long row of small cells. All night long and throughout the day as well, the downtown police headquarters basement jail was patrolled by its ugly, loud, motorized, rotating eye, disturbing man and beast alike and insuring that whatever sleep you might have been able to steal was rudely interrupted just at the moment it might have set in. A little bit of Hell to follow you through your night reminding you every moment of every hour, you're in jail, you're fucked, welcome to Hell where you can't even kill yourself in peace. No *hanging up* as they call that form of jailhouse suicide. Now that's an invasion of privacy if ever there was one. There were about twenty cells in the row, each cage containing at least one or two barefoot, beltless prisoners, alternating their turns on the single, cold steel of the merciless cot bolted and welded to the grimy green metal walls and floor. Oh the Hell of it and this was nothin' yet. Yeah it's true, they take away your shoelaces, belts, personnel property and of course, your dignity. If you had any it went right out the stained glass window as soon as the handcuffs went on, there went your freedom and with it your basic human dignity dissolves. Now, you're a chained animal, but they don't want anybody hanging themselves with belts or shoelaces which might seem humane but it's not. It's insurance against lawsuits. You're still an animal. Actual *toughguys* don't hang

themselves or surrender anyway; they *hold court in the streets* like *Cinque Defreeze*, *Clyde Barrow* and *Billy the Kid*, real bad motherfuckers. Not Kabbo though, he ended up with his pal handcuffed and transported from the friendly neighborhood precinct house to the less friendly police headquarters in downtown Mineola the county seat, police prison that is, cold ugly cells, clanking cameras, early Sunday morning, too late for court, breakfast or was that lunch? Anyway, nobody gives a fuck. That's clear right away. Now you're waste product, less than an animal. You get fed when you get fed, maybe tomorrow morning, before court, maybe not; stale or moldy white bread and blue baloney sandwiches and too sweet coffee. *Don't like it? Fuck you. Don't eat. This is jail not Howard Johnson's*. COs, guys that might ordinarily treat you squarely, maybe even politely out on the streets, maybe even help you change a flat tire if you were stuck without a jack were suddenly transformed into big, ugly, ogres with uniforms and badges and sticks and guns and advanced attitude problems. Laughing at you, jeering, cold, cruel, brutal and just plain dumb. The same schmucks you'd see out on the streets, in the supermarket, on line at the post office, ordinary clowns. Now they had power over somebody temporarily less important than they. Big power, state power and so irresistible to these brainless, beer-headed fucks – it was time for them to play *King of the Nobodies* and they made the most of it including all the rules. Not the written ones but the real ones, the ones you better follow or not got caught breakin'. Rule Number Two, the quiet but real one after the famous fake one *honesty's the best policy* is *don't get caught*. Tricky these rules, you gota' examine them case by case `cause some mean what they say while others, well, there's just more – or less to'm than the words represent and it's hard to know which is which without the best teachers of them all to guide you, and we all know who they are: *time* and *experience*. Anyway, *jail*, that's what you get for being a loser, that's what you get for breaking Rule Number Two. Now for me reality was a matter of realizing that this shit was for real and I was in it and not getting out which ain't no easy pill to swallow. Not then anyway, you see that meant no partyin' with my friends

tonight, no heartbroken hitchhikes to Sherry's, no laying safe and alone in my bed listening to Neil Young's *Down By the River* toasting marshmallows on a fork using a lit candle in a bottle positioned and balanced just right on my chest while staring mesmerized at the flame and stoned on good weed. Nope. None of that good stuff. Tonight I'd be sharing a dull, green, pale lit cell with a filthy drunken two-hundred pound beast, all night, writhing, farting, moaning aloud, fearing he'd roll over on me in his wretchedness from the steel rack or just lean to the side and puke on me while I prayed I'd wake up from a sleep I never had and find it was all a nightmare ready to disappear with the gray break of dawn and the opening of my eyes. Not to be. Just the camera again and again groaning its ceaseless mechanical Hell back and forth reminding me it was very real and though the dawn did appear gray this was no dream and I was already quite awake.

Oh boy! That's about the size of it. Oh *fuck'n* boy! As the hours of that terrible Sunday afternoon dragged by and the camera did the same, emphasizing and merging the sounds of its anguish with the heart of my own while rapidly running out of imaginative ways to fantasize the glory of the situation the scene was quickly losing its novelty. Let's see, James Cagney, Riff from *West Side Story*, Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, Alex the Droog leader, fuck it, this sucks, all too hard, ugly and real. The cells reeked with the stench of temporality and anguish, nobody stayed here long. Just enough time spent to leave a faint trace of their misery and pain. A scratched nickname and date in the thick paint and steel of the yellow green, grime covered wall, a big "*FTW*" shrieked in pencil covering half scratched out phone numbers, a mis-drawn swastika, "*niggers die*," a pair of drooping tits, spit, sweat, filth and fear, still believing I'd be going home the next day, as soon as we got to court so didn't panic, just took it all in like it was a movie and I'm merely a spectator of the surreal and ghastly scene. But this was surely no fun, spending most of my time trying to imagine how to glorify the story to my friends around the next bowl we'd smoke together and earn points with the local thugs, the real and the posers as a bona

fide *toughguy-outlaw-jailhouse-criminal*. What better way to spend the hours waiting to be overwhelmed by sleep on that cold, hard concrete and filth floor than to dream awake? Once half-sleep would for a moment come with it came vague dreams of being engulfed by prison and escaping before being awakened by the clanking of the camera on its steel track path and in those split seconds as consciousness convenes pray that with the fading of the dream I'd find myself home, safe, free comfortable and alive. *No!* The scene was no dream, it was real – a living nightmare there was no waking up from, this was not going away and was gonna have to be endured 'til whenever. When the dawn of the Monday morning finally did arrive it brought with it the abrupt clanking open of the iron barred cell gates. In unison to shouted commands we exited our gray-green metal tombs and in graceless order were handcuffed to each other in twos before being led off the tier and out of the building's rear porthole to be seated in the already running vans waiting to take us the block or two to the court house where we'd be fed yesterday's leftover, stale sandwiches then stood in front of a judge for arraignment. Finally! *Habeas corpus* folks. *Hear Ye! Hear Ye! Innocent 'til proven guilty. Here come da' judge y'all! Keep da' shit sandwiches 'cause I'm-a headed home!*

The *bullpen* in the downstairs courthouse lockup as they call it was quite crowded, maybe like twenty or thirty prisoners, mainly standing room with barely enough space between us to light a smoke if you had one, which they say was usual on a Monday morning. All the *weekend warriors* wrestled in from their sundry marauding were collected here in the raucous gloom of the basement prison cell. At 16 years old and 140 lbs maneuvering for a seat on one of the three benches attached to the interior walls required tact, skill and timing, it helped if the guy you were handcuffed to was a beefy two hundred pounder who'd been there before and knew the ropes, but not enough, he sat, I stood. Manners are important but size and strength, like brute force in a high school parking lot count for even more in the bullpen. Suited lawyers jammed up at the front of the cell made their hectic ways through the shackled outstretched arms to find the

prisoners whose names they repeatedly called out for a moment of quick conversation, maybe a passed cigarette or a scribbled note. It's a desperate scene, rushing through the preparations like last minute rehearsing actors heading to the stage. All I could see through the thick clouds of smoke and the stench of rancid body odor were tattooed muscular arms and scattered shreds of dirty toilet paper strewn about. It's funny what you remember, funny yeah, but not laughing funny, no. The guy I was handcuffed to was a muscular, young black guy with about the broadest shoulders I ever saw in my life. His hands were three of mine and he wasn't happy. Again, he sat, I stood. His arm moved, my arm moved. He said my breath stank. I didn't argue, didn't ask if he was planning on kissing me. His face nearly froze me with fear but tried not to show it. I had some practice hiding fear. Anyway, big relief when the guards started calling out names, meaning that it was soon time to see the judge and we'd be separated, maybe forever and I'd never see him again which would be ideal, as it looked like he might decide to pummel me for a bit of recreation by using the handcuff to lift then body slam me up and down like a rag doll until I stopped breathing. Welcome to the jailhouse, *whiteboy – now you with us.*

The middle-aged, gray-haired, balding and mustachioed judge, His Honor Alfred P. Samenga sat glowering down at everybody from the tall bench in the front of the large, oak paneled courtroom. He mostly ignored the handcuffed defendants standing humbly before him and quietly spoke his legal mumbo-jumbo with the prosecutors, defense lawyers and clerks buzzing about busily to either side of him. This really scared you, the fact that he all but ignored you `cause like I said when he did look up at you it was usually with a look of modified disgust, a restrained scowl indicating he already knew you were probably guilty and his sympathy quotient was in very low reserve. Ma' and pa' Kane were there, my parents were there, half the county criminal justice system seemed like they were there in the courtroom that morning. I could taste freedom. Please G-d, don't put me back in that cage with those shitty, graffiti, smells of sweat and fear cuffed to that angry *Mighty Joe Young* maniac,

acutely aware that he and I weren't destined to become pals. The names of the accused are announced. Two at a time we approached the partition before the bench, praying, hearing my heart pound with loud thuds, trying to control my face muscles so to look respectful and contrite, worthy of mercy, a touch pitiful, but not too much, over doing it might be seen as an attempt at manipulation and backfire sending you deeper into a pile of crap that you might otherwise have avoided, like Scar and Marko Fucko both managed. Carefully guessing at what body posture and vocal tone might be appropriate to my goal I shifted not knowing, hoping, guessing, thinking it made a difference, naively believing so. You don't want to add an unofficial *attempted manipulation of a judge through contrived pretense of deserved pity* to the list of official charges you face. Chin up, guessing it might be better to play it stoic and brave with just a touch of fear showing through the eyes so as to possibly evoke a measure of compassion, perhaps pity. *I did it but (now that I'm here) am real sorry, sir.* I'd actually been through this once before, a dry run, when my dear mother had me arrested and locked up overnight about a year before for running amok in the house destroying everything I could kick, punch or throw while high or drunk or angry or all three, but after that very first night of incarceration spent in the same camera-ridden police lockup I went home. It was easy that time, my grandmother's second "husband" showed up (not really husband, a live-in boyfriend to my surprise it later turned out, Mom-Mom shackin' up with a part-time judge who she made sure looked out for her *Peck's Bad Boy* on more than one occasion, so he did) Saul the lawyer and I was cut loose at arraignment. *Thanks ma', for helping break my criminal record cherry*. But this time, this time when they called our names, Jimmy's and mine, after the legal mumbo-jumbo talk Jimmy was uncuffed and let go into his parents' waiting embrace, appalled as they were at least their son was safe for now while I watched myself being led out of the courtroom and back into the smoky, stinking shit pool of *the bullpen* again. What went wrong? A mistake? Clerical or procedural error maybe? My parents were there and with a lawyer so what was up? About fifteen minutes later the lawyer

made his way back to the holding area and called out my name. Somehow, I managed to advance forward to the front of the cell through the crowd of hulking, bulky, tattooed, and stinking beasts only to be told by him that "they," my parents and he requested that I be *remanded* for the 7-3030 Test. *7-3030 Test?* A psych test? What the fuck was that? What the fuck were they talkin' about? *Remanded?* It obviously meant going back to jail but weren't lawyers were supposed to get you *out* of jail not make sure you had to stay in one! *Hello! Ground control to Major Tom! Come in.* Remanded to the county jail. Remanded, bail rescinded. What the fuck did that mean? No bail. Held without bail. What were my parents paying him for? That meant nobody could bail me out. Not my friends, not my girlfriend, not even her sympathetic, frosty haired mother who maybe might have. First guy in middle-class history to be held without bail for breaking fucking windows – even the goddamn Constitution guarantees a reasonable bail. But I guess the ornery sixteen year old was too fuck'n dangerous and evil for that. Yeah, right. But I was gonna get killed! That fake *toughguy* crap started runnin' right out of me like a cold pee down a warm leg! *7-3030 Test?* What about Jimmy? Why was he going home? Where was Scar? Weren't they maybe crazy too? 7-3030 them! *I'm sixteen fucking years old.* What the fuck did they have in mind? I needed to take a fucking test to see if I was sane enough to understand the window breaking charges against me? Let's get real, let's not make this into *Sacco and Vanzetti* here, I mean it's not a capital offense, not even any blood was drawn, it was property damage, that's it. Property damage. *Mischief*. The lawyer said I'd be home in a short while though he wouldn't say exactly when – "short while"? I might not make it a *short while*. A *short while* might just be long enough for a death sentence. Did he not see where we were and to whom I was cuffed? He seemed pretty confident and relaxed, that suited smiling *son-of-a-bitch*, guess he thought he could handle this big case. Sure, easy for him to act confident and secure. His pampered white ass didn't have to deal with *Spider, Red* and *Bear* and he was going out for lunch after making a quick $500 selling me up the river at my parents' behest. *7-3030 them!* Can you fuck'n

believe this? Were they crazy? Why not just throw me naked and crippled into a den of hungry wolves? I mean after all, I broke some goddamn windows, yeah, ridiculously expensive ones so why shouldn't I be condemned to an interminable stay in a rancid pit of earthly hell? Actually asking the judge to keep your son in jail? What were they thinking? Did they want to see me suffer? Did they want me dead? What was I? *Son of Attila the Hun? The Boston Strangler? Al Ca-fuck'n-pone? Who? What?* I distinctly heard the judge say: "$200.00 bail." Two-hundred dollars and I could be going home? Not back to the rat-cage, a white sixteen year old, the son of an optometrist at all of 140 wet goddamn pounds! *Why?* I might be able to sometimes get away with playing teenage *toughguy* in the Rockville Center high-school parking lot among my puss-pimpled peers but this was a much different arena entirely, an arena definitely not built for me. The only real thing tough about me then was my luck. Born wrong. Wrong from the get-go. *Oh boy!* Here comes the misery, here comes the pain and make way for a lot of it.

Rolling up handcuffed and shackled, picture Don Knots tryin' his best to look unfazed *Cool Hand Luke* style, *Kid Kabbo* in the jail van. We rode on to the *big house*, a beige brick, ultra-modern, cold, clean, rectangular, trapezoid, hemorrhoid, barbed wire, horror hall dubbed the Nassau County Correctional Center. This was really fuck'n ugly, really fuck'n ugly. The van, seating about a dozen despondent, fully shackled soon-to-be inmates and two fully armed *COs* stopped at the first guard post just outside the main rear gate of the walled perimeter that led to another of several asphalt yards all surrounded by thirty-foot high, barb-wired walls capped by armed guards in watchtowers encircling even more electrified steel gates and cages. It didn't look like a Hollywood set. It had no old-style prison atmosphere, a kind of dark, gallows mystique, I always thought. Zero. I kinda' like those old-style prisons, you know, like the *Count of Monty Cristo* or Alcatraz, like a place that looks like a medieval fortress where you can do push-ups all day and read Emanuel Kant between sets, master chess, dig a tunnel with a fork, teach a sick bird the alphabet or something, somber, clean, quiet,

build a model car from flies' wings like my cousin the war-hero, pilot instructor Malcolm Dorfman supposedly did, monumental gray stones cemented snugly together in time, *Crusader Rabbit and Rags* lost in the catacombs, isolated, spooky, and bad. That might be handleable for a while, classic, cinematic, having been fascinated by jails, prisons and criminals ever since memory reminds, but not this place, it took itself way too seriously, looking like a metal brick square box factory with no place to hide inside, industrial strength ugly, cold and merciless. Pulling up in the county van the COs exchanged some routinely brief small talk, chuckles and signatures, shift ends at four, BBQ and beers at five. Once we passed the first set of armed guards manning the outermost steel gate framed by coiled razor wire, followed by the rigid, mechanical opening and shutting of the second gate, these guards now unarmed, and then the final electrified set of steel gates, we were backed up, parked and unloaded onto the reception platform at the back end of the building, near where the rest of the garbage was set dull orange dumpsters. I was still alive. There were no acknowledging nods here. There were no counselors, lawyers, social workers, parents, friends, or girlfriends to greet us – just a lot of badges, belt buckles, and brawn; gold-wearing, burly prison guards and unsmiling, hard-looking, tattooed inmates straight from the trailer park doing busy work in the antiseptic green and brushed chrome reception area to welcome us to this house of cinderblock, steel, glass, grief, violence, and regret. The prisoners mostly ignored us, looking cool and detached, almost comfortable and at home here as they swept, mopped, smoked, and glared mean into space, occasionally pausing from their easy motions to check us out and maybe spot someone they knew. Even that was unsettling. Why were they so relaxed here? What happened to them that they seemed to accept being there so naturally, like it was okay or something, life without females, life in a cage, just another day in just another life? Meanwhile, I'm praying for an atom bomb to drop a block or so away to take my chances with the blast and maybe escape. Maybe Canada or Mars'd invade us. I wanted to be the size of an ant and creep away, even risk bein' stepped on. How much worse could a sudden end be? Dull, gray

green walls, concrete tile, brushed steel mirrors, gray painted iron bars on gates, glass so thick you could barely see light through it, nearly overwhelmed by the numbers, sizes and demeanor of the locals at this pitiless house of incarceration. "Abandon all hope…" No cigarettes either. I had a bad tobacco Jones in those days, smoking a pack, pack and a half a day of Newports, Marlboros and OP's, just about whatever could be rolled up into paper and burned. And forget grubbing off another unfortunate `cause after an overnight at the police lockup and a morning in court they were all out too. Nobody gets busted with enough smokes on'm to get through arraignment, until the re-supply comes through. Tense gets tenser. First thing they do is *process* you again, strip you, fingerprint you, search you, photograph you, and then give you your shit. It takes a couple of hours. If you ask real nice and they feel like it you can make your panicked phone call home, or to whoever, begging for bail money, cigarettes, a visit or even a word of encouragement which as soon as they gave me the chance that's just what I did, promised the latter three, not the first, the critical one. No bail. They saw to that. Sonny-boy was all in. *7-3030 Test* my ass. Sonny-boy's gonna be dead, over at sixteen. So, there I sat with a random crew of assorted local losers, me among the youngest and smallest in the downstairs reception cell with my bedroll, toilet paper, and state soap waiting for my temporary housing assignment. It felt like you could smell the fear on me. Every glance from every other being in this place of bizarre social interaction was scanned quickly but intensely and screened for signs of hostile intent – this wasn't paranoia, this was survival. They give you a manual, a booklet that spells out everything you don't need to know about where you now are and maybe survive. It actually begins something like: "*Welcome to the Nassau County Correctional Center, you have been placed here because...*" Holy shit, was I supposed to actually read this crap? *Welcome?* Am I supposed to feel welcome? Pass me my robe, slippers, and pipe. Was this someone's sick idea of a joke? "*Welcome*"? Was it gonna tell me how to get the fuck out? A quiz? Hey *motherfucker* like I told you before, school was already out! Check out the frightened, little, white boy who sees right away that

tough as he played it, faking it on the soft, suburban, mean streets of Rockville Fucking Center, things were gonna get just a little rougher here, maybe a lot rougher, and for real. And for real and for sure they certainly did.

What do you do with time?

The darkness of the gloomy cavern suggested a sort of ghostly fog of dim, blue-gray light. Comprised by a row of twenty adjacent cells, a tier, the tunnel had a shower with a toilet and telephone space combined at the entry end, three or four chrome, steel picnic type tables with chess/checker boards etched into the surfaces bolted to the floor, and at the far end of each tier a color television set mounted to the upper corner of the cat-walk wall just outside the long, steel cage close enough to reach by hand. Each floor had four tiers arranged as a rectangular block, two wide, two deep. Bordering the block along the perimeter was an ally formed by a zoo-like wall of vertical iron bars separating the free world from us inmates and from where the guards patrolled around the entire rectangle, calling it the *catwalk.* Inside the darkness lurked a pair of white inmate *trustees.* Young men in their twenties, scarred and wiry, old before their times, guys who had learned to live, forced by self created necessity to adapt to living inside the jailhouse world where they wore their well practiced *fear me, I'm hard* faces. At least that was how it read. They were living a *jailin' it* lifestyle, types straight out of the ugly bottom of the *Alpha Theta Chi* alumni yearbook they were, the former, imaginary, Dukes of Earl. These guys though? They didn't appear the types who'd'a crapped out in the face of the Smith's assault. They'd go for broke, gone down swingin' or maybe not gone down at all, which pretty much sums up who they were and why they were there, *trustees* on B-Floor. Welcome to that world. One of them greeted us at the first steel gate just as we entered the temporary housing tier, the *old building* with a mop in his hand swinging it past my feet as he hurried through to get somewhere or do something. He had business, mop business so basically ignored

us as he brushed past but in that instant noticed the lightning bolt looking jagged scar that started just above his brow then cut across his right eye folding the lid in somewhat and continuing down deep into the flesh of his upper cheek. Somebody must have tried to stop his clock in his younger days comin' up which he musta' just barely survived. That blow was meant to kill. The other guy? Who knows? But the scar wasn't new, it had had time to settle in as did the guy who wore it. Solemn, vicious, blue-collared, sharp toothed and tattooed, mostly hand-drawn. They both wore *state* open toe'd, rubber slippers, like they were in their living rooms and we were guests dropping by. This was no good. His partner, the other white trustee dude, a crew-cutted, muscular brute, sat on a table top at the far end of the tier by the TV, smoking a cigarette rolled with Tops *state* tobacco and rolling papers, glaring nonchalantly, blowing perfectly concentric smoke rings into the gloomy face of nowhere, like he was master of all he surveys. Charity smokes. Not bad, a little harsh, no filter or additives but they were free. Good deal too, `specially if you wanted lung cancer by like next week and your choice was them, hustling other folks' or none. Some people, like destitute inmates actually quit. Others, like me, get them from outside and then have to carefully negotiate how to keep'm, who to give'm out to when asked, what to expect in return and who to say *no* to. It's all very important. Nothing random. A wrong call could be even more hazardous to your health than the tar and nicotine.

Nassau County Jail's a funny place though, again, not laughing funny but odd funny. Odd in a dark way – it's rated a triple "A" Maximum Security facility which had something to do the number of feet an inmate can walk before being stopped by a locked steel gate or concrete wall, where without ever actually measuring was obviously not too many. Yet, as far as the security of the inmates themselves, it might as well have been rated triple "A" Minimum. Practically none. Negative security. The jailhouse is built basically to house pretrial detainees; those who can't make or are denied bail and/or serving less than one year, *county*-time and in this odd case a rare unfortunate whose parents actually had his bail remanded. *Yeah.*

So, that means you might have a poor slob of an ordinary guy in there `cause he failed to appear for court to answer a traffic summons housed with the most ornery "*mother rapers and father stabbers*" with wild eyed stares and foam still curdling out the sides of their quivering, chaffing, blood stained lips. Literally at times, that is. Well, actually the (alleged) killers I had occasion to play cards or chess with, inmates there for *a body* were usually the coolest and calmest guys around, as though they had gotten it all out of their systems and were now ready to mellow on down the prison road at least until the next fatal encounter which could occur at any moment so despite the mellow they seemed ever ready to turn on a dime and bash your head in with whatever was handy, like maybe a telephone receiver. But really, they were the coolest breezes in the joint, you would never know, calmly asserting their innocence when the conversation got that deep. It was *pretrial* so you knew and they knew you knew but what was said was accepted as fact in the conversation, after all it's only polite in a place where *rude* you definitely don't want to be. And I wasn't wearing any black robes – rather in prison blues – so it was *us* against *them* and if you claimed you were innocent? You were innocent. Everybody's innocent even by law until proven otherwise yet it was clearly and quickly apparent upon entering the darkened tunnel of the B-Floor temporary housing unit that the character of my surrounding social world had taken a distinct and abrupt turn south towards the cryptic, eclectic and alarmingly malignant, in a word? Dangerous. Two words? Very dangerous.

The two *housemouses*, *Loeb* and *Leopold*, jailhouse tattooed, push-up pumped, longhaired and pale were the locals here. That meant as *trustees* they lived there on a semi-permanent basis, as long as their bids which are ordinarily a year or less in county jails. They had their own cells all hooked up, *Better Cells and Cages* complete with the requisite cut out pictures of naked women tooth-pasted to the walls, biker magazines, and of course a calendar. They ate there, had a transistor radio using twisted, cut up, aluminum foil from a cigarette pack as an antennae, lots of extra unopened cereal boxes,

neatly piled stacks of soap bars complimenting assorted cheap cosmetics and hygiene accessories, like they were going somewhere, a night out on the town, jailhouse status – *I got it like that!* – inmate Monopoly money. It was clearly by some kinda' desperate, pathetic choice though, they liked it, that was easy to see despite the transparent pretense of otherwise, the routine scowls. Here they had a place, a job and were *somebody* and so taken care of accordingly; life's hassles, challenges and complexities reduced to maintaining the convincing *convict* persona and occasionally rocking somebody while not getting rocked, at least not too hard or too often. They got to mop and dish out the food, not be locked in and who knows what the other real perq's were? Probably booze and drugs from the guards or from whomever. Maybe one of the COs was bangin' someone's sister. Whatever they could afford and get away with from the outside they got. Anyway, these boys were taken care of and I think that that was what it was quietly all about, being taken care of like little kids afraid of the big, bad real world outside – but despite the charade they could still play it hard, rat-bastard mean and tough as needed, all the way to lethal.

Behold, B-Floor was dark, uncomfortable and unwelcoming. Most of the other inmates were black and Hispanics with an assorted lot of odd, white biker types, drunks and an outa' control, citizen-beanbag or two like me around for added variety. Big, angry and unwashed men yelling into the telephone, shouting vulgarisms into the air, punching and kicking hard the thin sheet metal walls that separated the cells, animals in cages raging in unmitigated despair, guys threatening each other over elbow room and time on the phone, frightened people handing out cigarettes or soliciting them, quietly questioning each other about what to expect. *When do we go to court? You gota' street-lawyer or Legal Aid? You got a bail-bondsman number?* Not much goofing around. No playtime. Thank Odin's stars it was one to a cell, at least that first night and it was so dark, like a medieval dungeon. There were working lights only they were turned out or down, it may have been at the trustees' request or it may have been unintentional, but the gloomy dark atmosphere of

shadows felt just about right in this depressing, anxious and purgatory place where there wasn't a hell of a lot anybody wanted to look at anyway. It was a twenty-three hour lock-in tier which meant like it says, you were supposed to be locked in for twenty-three out of every twenty-four – an hour out to shower, make a phone call (collect only) or just stretch your legs – social hour – get to know your neighbor hour. "Hi, I'm Azim, your local angry victim of the *white-racist-imperialist-capitalist-rat-race* and I'm gonna split your nasty-ass, white skull wide open for you if you don't quickly hand me over your sneakers, cigarettes, candy, gum and whatever else you might have that now belongs to me including any orifice of yours I might want to make a deposit in!" Luckily, I didn't see any of that, but the threat was always there, bad enough. Here, after your medical inspection was where they kept incoming inmates of all ages until they found a rack for you in the general population usually separated by ages, minors from adults. It was only supposed to be for a single twenty-four hour period but because of chronic over-crowding it could go on for days. Try spending a day or two or three in an eight by ten foot space, it gets real small and real tight real quick. Take my word for it, your back aches from layin' down all the time and there's no place to walk. Even just standing in place gets to be a tense bummer. No wonder some people *hang up* after too much time spent in a small cage. All this predator's paradise gloom was absorbed as we rolled in with our thin, plastic coated mattresses, state soap, toilet paper and ratty, gray wool blankets tucked under our arms. Once inside the tier the CO called out last names and numbers assigning us cells. Next, the burly, bored and cheap-lookin' Elvis wannabe with a badge ordered us to line up just outside their respective gates. *"On the lock-in!"* he grunt-shouted and with a crank of his arm pulled the iron handle of the electronic lever back so all twenty cell gates grinded open along their noisy metal tracks crashing into their locked open position. After ordering us in he pushed it forward so they reversed direction, steel mashing steel again to a harsh, final crashing shut closed with the inmates inside. *Bang!* Locked in tight, finally alone where at least Mr.

Kabbo the High School Parking Lot Toughguy felt for a moment safe enough to exhale.

The sound of a prison tier at night is like nothing else I'd ever heard or could imagine, the word is *cacophony* but it barely describes the chaotic mixture of groans, shouts, hideous whispers, blaring radio noise of different colliding stations, howls of sinister laughter and cries of despair that surround and engulf you. There's no place for the sound to escape, locked in a narrow tunnel so it's truly and deeply immersive. It takes quite a while after lights out to finally settle down to an uninterrupted quiet long enough for sleep to set in but when it does? It's precious and fleeting. Late one night, maybe the second or third in, just after quiet came another sound, something my young ears would never forget. Talk about *singin' the blues?* These was them. Coming from down the end of the tier, long after something like peaceful set in over the herd of dozing cattle was the perfect harmony of *a cappella* blues sung by none other than the hard as rocks, tough as nails, scarred and battered trustees. And what were they singing? I'd never heard the tune before but never forgot it since – in all its intentional pathos, not that the tune itself is so memorable but coming from this particular duo in this particular setting – those hard boiled faces in this merciless, cold, steel dormitory of sorrow, dread and self-reflection, it reached me deep down. It was Don and Juan's *What's Your Name?* A *doo-wop* love song straight from the corner neighborhood, a song about what it feels like not being worth enough to even ask the pretty girl her name, a song sung straight from these hard and battle scarred boys' hearts. It was tight, well practiced; they had the time and natural talent and it sounded it. They didn't cry it; they sang it with all they had and with perfect harmony and timing. The echoes of their voices bounced off the cell walls where they reverberated against the chambers of my broken heart, where the outer darkness of the corridor perfectly mirrored the darkness of my inner world. It so fit. We were one, Zen hell. The acoustics and their effects though were fantastic, creating an almost profound moment, so real – I know it sounds corny, but so what? It had to be said, or sung – "*what's your*

name, is it Mary or Sue?" Sherry. "*What's your name, do I stand a chance with you*?" Maybe. Put it out there. Maybe I'll let it in or maybe I'll cut it off and watch you bleed. Yeah. No, they didn't cry it, they sang it but I heard the tears through their voices and their tears accentuated mine as I felt less than too, less than anybody, even less than them. At least they belonged somewhere. I was always lost. "*It's so hard to find a personality with charms like yours for me…*" Sherry "*needed to see other people."* Sherry wasn't mine. I could hardly breathe. It was worse than jail. Anyway, that cheesy *doowop* hit has haunted me ever since, reminding me always of the humanity and the need for its expression hiding beneath some of the harshest exteriors even within the unlikely confines of the cold corridors in brutal places. Despite all that these fellas knew *who* and clearly accepted *what* they were and what they were not and therefore that was that. *Shoooby-do-be-da-wah-wa-bap – shoo baaaa...* Broken-hearted jailbirds flocked together. Case closed.

Gladiator School

Inside each grimy cell was a double bunk metal rack, a sink/toilet combination, a small metal desk/bench and in the far corner of the ceiling, up above the rack, a dim light shielded by a stained, plastic lens. It smelled like fear and desperation. Among the crude, penciled vulgarities and "*fuck the world"* graffiti gouged into the painted walls was an etching of an erect, ejaculating penis. Not good. There was a stained and torn but readable *Louis Lamour* cowboy paperback, among white-boys a jailhouse favorite I'd later learn, tucked under the blue-green, piss-stained mattress which I picked up and glanced through, then eventually read, savoring every image, anything to escape, even if only through imagination, glad someone left it. Never before knew how powerful an escape a book can be, even a simple one so I read, burying myself in the dime-store, old west, six-gun outlaw fantasy. The first night was spent alone; just me and the book, on day two there was company. The overcrowding necessitated the use of the bunk bed style cots so sometime during

the day when another shift of prisoners were processed through the reception area I became host to my first jailhouse roommate, not quite a guest, not quiet a friend, but real close by necessity anyway, a *celly* detoxing from who knows what, a young black dude from Hempstead, a neighboring town. His name I don't remember, it may have been Henry or Hank, but him I do and would remember him for a longer time than imagined, crossing paths again on another bid five or so years later. He was okay, and except for the skin-color we were practically *homies*, knowing some of the same locals, blacks and whites, town athletes and legendary hometown criminals of note. He put me at ease right away, though he was probably kicking something or other, and a little shaky and unkempt, not his regular I could tell, but a few jokes and a shared smoke'll break the ice, we were cellmates and soon almost friends. The skin-color thing in the can is a thousand times more intense than out in *the world* so you can't be officially friends, but the impulse towards human camaraderie, the "we shall overcome" variety, especially in tight spots sometimes runs deeper, plenty of stories from and for another time, the other bid, that heavier bid. Hank was a tall and well-built, dark skinned brother, sarcastic, a burglar by trade he said who'd been there before, many times. He knew some of the COs by name and they him, he cracked wise with them and they didn't seem to mind – a natural leader kind of guy, bright and aware yet obviously like me, wayward, as in somehow not quite obedient enough to be *well adjusted*, more like *discontented* in that classical Freudian way; drugs, blackness in America, too angry to give straight up citizen life a fair chance, just plain meanness, over-abundant testosterone, who knows? Maybe, like me it was simpler, more overt, just his way of being a young man, it was just him, who he was, *shootin' his regular,* which often includes for guys like us our share of time in the can owing to one cause or another, in a word: *crime.*

Lotso' pain here. After two or three days in the dark blue pit of anxiousness and fear spent making my usual *best of a bad situation*: eating candy, sharing smokes, the cowboy novel and joking around with my celly, in between a lot of sleeping I emerged to the call of

the big, burly Elvis *look-alike* wannabee guard and deployed the remnants of my reservoir of courage to the next stage of this trialous tribulation. Too cautious to shower during this period, no one aside the *trustees* did, I felt as bad as I looked. Pardon the Charlie Dickens reference but this was truly the worst of times. No dichotomous split here, not the best of them, just the worst, worth highlighting, but not yet the worst of the worst. That was yet to come. Again the CO, that's how they're called, corrections officers, or *COs* called out the cell numbers of those who were instructed to pack up and move out, like in the army only without the pretense of dignity or honor. Every command is prefaced with the two word phrase: *"on the..."* as in *"on the* cigarettes" or "*on the* lockout." It was never clear exactly what the "on the" phrase specifically referred to but *lock-out* meant get the hell out of the cell `cause the gates are gonna close and you best be on the right side of them when they're shut lest you risk a serious *beat down* by the *goon squad* – the heavy hitter COs sent in to quell prisoners whose *minds were just not quite right* (courtesy Strother Martin). We were heading off on an indoor field trip to be housed in general population. On the move and moving right along. After my gear was quickly packed I obediently followed the call forward to the front end of the tier where about five or six of us were led out of the locked corridor and directed up the unlocked stairs one or two flights, then across a brightly lit, short narrow hall to the large freight elevator of the adjacent new building wing. Next up, a fast elevator ride before entering and exiting more freshly mopped corridors, each with a brushed metal, wide-angle, large convex mirror mounted to ceiling corners at every juncture, and through several more thick, iron, floor to ceiling locked doors and electronic gates, never more than ten to twenty feet between them. After the dispatch of several inmates at stops along the way, again, separated mostly by age, I finally found myself standing with only one or two remaining others, still escorted by a couple of hulky, bulky, cowboy Elvis wannabes, just outside one of the most memorable and jolting sights my young eyes had up until then and even 'til now ever seen.

Vonnegut's got a book title that if I could invent and claim sure would, but since I can't I'll just borrow and use it because it fits so perfectly well with what I'm about to describe: "*welcome to the monkey house.*" Inmates called the minor tiers filled with violent, *hell-bent* on destruction wild kids *Gladiator School*. Both fit. The rectangular hall at the central juncture of the four tiers on G Floor, two on each side, north and south, had four sets of steel doors, two each, one that allows entry to the row of cells, or *tier* for the inmates and the second to their accompanying parallel *catwalk* corridor separated by evenly spaced at about eight inches apart vertical iron bars for the guards to patrol along creating for the prisoners one long and narrow steel cage outside their respective cells. Through a roughly ten inch square thick but clear glass window in the doors placed at just about eye level in front of me – offering an inside from outside view of the entire length of the tier, apparently very soon to be my new home I could see the occupants and they me, and engaged in a brief stare down with several for just a moment or two before being shoved inside, a pre-welcome unwelcome. That brief stare down – that image – that was when the threat of an alarming future revealed itself, me, there in my natural habitat, a jailbird, a convict, a chance to be a true toughguy, or dead trying and would have rather had been anybody else almost anywhere else on the planet than me here just then. Inside the occupants were mostly black, out-of-control and otherwise very troubled looking teens like me and worse, yet they looked oddly enough at home and comfortable in there, lounging on woolen blankets used as hammocks stretched across the corner bars in front the TV, durags from bed sheets and nylon scraps, cigarettes seated behind the ears or dangling from lips, card games, push-ups, freshly applied talcum powder all over their skin like it was a gentleman's health spa or the New York Athletic Club, stacks of cereal boxes and cosmetics, porno magazines called *short-eyes,* the big color TV, yes, comfortable under the strange circumstances, but not to say in any way actually happy, neither to be there nor to see me. They wanted more *brothers.* I was not a *brother.* The strange scene looked like a college frat house only without the pretense of privilege or modicum

of prestige. Perched upon, others standing astride the closest steel card and eating tables or literally hanging from the bars suspended by the blankets and sheets they stared casually through the window at me signaling a warning mixture of curiosity, disgust and a sort of delighted villainous amusement, like the hungry, bored and frustrated cats were about to get a new, uninitiated, scared and mostly defenseless mouse to play with. No *7-3030* tests ordered for these fellas, I didn't imagine. No one cared if they were *crazy* or not. They were black and couldn't afford bail. Period. Most were shirtless, revealing well defined and muscular torsos atop beltless and oversized jailhouse, neatly pressed clean pants slung low off their jutting behinds encased in assorted designs of the same durag material, nylon boxer *drawers*, underwear, no *superman drawers* or *punk panties* as they called Jockeys briefs, that you learn quick. Style counts. Ditch'm if you got'm and get someone on the outside to replace'm with cotton or nylon boxers quick. On their feet either very expensive, new looking unlaced sneakers or clean, state issued open-toed, rubber slippers and maybe sporting a few rude, hand-drawn, jailhouse tattoos littering their otherwise usually well defined frames and the guys with the obvious jailhouse tattoos? You knew they were *home*. This was it. They'd arrived. But again, and worth repeating because for me it was so unexpected and memorable was the way they just hung out, so at ease despite the frustration of being locked up, cracking jokes, smoking, snacking, playing chess, sparring, hitting each other so hard you could hear the quick snap of the fist and the dull pound on flesh echo from yards away. This bizarre mix of background sights and sounds framed the slowly materializing collage of fluid forms I was about to join. And smoke, lots and lots of cigarette smoke. The radio blasted WBLS, Frankie Crocker, the premier disco station in the New York of the seventies, a few subdued white faces sitting quietly together in a cell, maybe one or two braver ones equally well adapted hanging out on the crowded tier, playing cards or watching the color TV perched outside the bars in the back corner broadcasting a daytime soap opera, the totality of the images delivering the unmistakable message: we're just about having a ball here with *three hots and a*

cot `cause this is our world and you enter at your own risk, *white boy*. All this gathered as notice from right before the start. Opening the steel door the CO motioned me forward and in so rolled up mattress, soap and toilet paper bundled into my arms I went. Welcome to G-Floor and the minor tiers, welcome to the *monkey house* kid, welcome to *Gladiator School*, you here but *you not invited. Not by us, you ain't.*

Now, despite the cold stares and malicious grins, up 'til then, I never had any sort of real problems with the black folk. In fact, I've found it pretty easy to get along with most of them, goin' back all the way to my early childhood with my *Aunt Til'* who was black, and when my family told me so, believed she was my actual blood relative who musta' had some kind of misfortune with the sun, making her dark-skinned, but loved her anyway, it made no difference, and so it made sense that it wasn't a *soul brotha'* who first confronted me, not even a jailhouse one. It was a white man who challenged me not thirty seconds after the tier door slammed shut behind me, leaving me alone inside without a handy squad of hulking CO goons to maintain some kind of order. No, not only was the dude white, but trash white. Greg Schmidt, "Schmitty," they called him. I hadn't entered the tier any deeper than six to ten feet when from behind the crowd of dark faces emerged the brazen, young, white dude, one of the comfortable ones, striding, half a gleam in his evil eye towards me. Another good, tough, physique on the guy, lota' pushups and squats, a cockyass grin on his jail-bird mug, shirtless, torso marked by a smattering of jailhouse tattoos indicating a lifetime incarcerated and a big wide jaw topped off by a tussle of dull blond hair. I judged right away, in an instant that he was probably not gonna try to do me any real harm. It was a test. *A wise guy*, a wise guy with bad skin who didn't give a fuck. Pockmarked and scarred he was nobody's prom date that was for sure. *Stick'm up* was probably the most articulate phrase he ever mastered. Getting in my face right away, still holding my bedroll and nerve together he asked, "can you wrestle?" In fact *yeah*, I could, pretty damn well too and told him so right away. Strength and speed with a low center of gravity along

with great balance saved me from getting my face punched in many a sad time and judged his question not to be academic in nature but practical as we were about to go at it. As usual, my opponent out weighed me by twenty five to fifty five or so pounds, stood at least five inches above me and probably had twice the muscle mass but the choice wasn't mine, this wasn't the junior high wrestling team captain, that was a given so we commenced to rumble. Him on top of me on the ground right off the bat, then a quick reversal, using leverage, strength and speed, my back on the ground I spun him over my head with my arms and legs, me now quick on top of him, the hard asphalt and tile floor getting the better of both of us, back and forth a bit until finally, hearts and breath racing towards the finish, he back on top, giving me my due, allowed an honorable pause, not a surrender, but a pause in the action – to be continued. He got a bit more than he hoped for and seemed pleasantly surprised, a *standup* little, white dude that could wrestle and not shy about mixing it up a bit. The black dudes sat and watched amused taking notes, barely missing a trick of the spades hand and me, dusting myself off and gathering my gear, not needing to introduce myself any further commenced the walk deeper into the tier to my new home, ten cell, with my newly assigned jailhouse nickname *Yo Ten Cell*.

There are a few ritual norms to *jailin' it* that nobody tells you before getting there, you don't get a chance to learn them anywhere else, no known prep courses available, just another of the life lessons ya' gota' learn on your own like the bullshit about *honesty bein*' *the best policy* and all. First up, you gota' wash down and clean out your cell before physically movin' in to it. It's not a written institutional rule; it's an unwritten inmate rule which of course are the ones that actually count so when you move right in, not knowing the rule you get the jailhouse version of a mild lesson, a crash course by opprobrium, verbal abuse attached to the continuous and immediate threat of physical attack. "*Hey yo mothufucka' get cho' stink ass out my neighba'hood `fo*' *I put a ter'ble hurt on yo' worl' some'in' eeevil!*" Laughter. The benefit to this sort of teaching plan is it

makes the lesson unmistakably clear right from the start, so acquiring a mop, rags and a bucket began cleaning the cell but not before acquiring the additional nickname of *dirty `bert* – from *Robert* – 'cause of the unwashed cell, distinguishing me from the less descriptive *Yo Ten Cell*. It doesn't take long in a group of twenty males crowded together in a cramped space under relentless pressure for a pecking order to set in and the acquired nickname can usually be recognized as an indicator of where one rates in this base and brutal hierarchy. Like *Bear* would be somewhere near the top whereas *dirty `bert* would land a lot closer to the other end. Not much reverence detected in the tone adjusted to calling out for *Yo Ten Cell!* Anyway, only white dudes ever use any parts of their real or given names. Some of the black inmates get religion, or pretend to, they go Muslim or African on you in there, change their names and elements of their wardrobe; stop eating *swine* and make sure to let everyone know about it, easy stuff, lots of style but not much substance that I could see. Guys raised in Long Island in Baptist churches named Calvin and Jesse are suddenly transformed into mythical, black, Arabian knights with names like *Mustafa* and *Shakau*, as though the Muslim Arabs are less racist or less prone to enslaving sub-Saharan Africans where they still do, largely ignored, than Europeans. The truth is so much worse than they can imagine they surrender logic and reasoning for the usual quick fix of another easy dose self-righteous, self-justifying rage, no matter how senseless and cowardly the scapegoating, no matter how ugly the rat packing provided by a comfortable 16:4 ratio, just another handy excuse to act out fistfuls of pain. Not impressed. Intimidated? Okay, yeah, who wouldn't be? I wasn't Bruce Lee or Rocky Marciano, not even Graziano, but *impressed?* No. Not the least. I humored them. *Toughguys* don't seek out easy shots to fake prove themselves on the cheap, it just doesn't work that way – *toughguy*s show up for combat missions against heavily armed opponents who hold the high ground like *D Day* or strike first in a *life-or-death* confrontation then beat the odds by going for broke *Six Day War* style and win – *toughguys* stand up when the chips are down and again, more to the point real toughguys *hold court in the streets.* These mythical Mohammedans

took themselves at least a notch or two too seriously and had little to show for their cheap, pseudo-pious posturing beyond new sneaker collections, jailhouse status symbols like picture frames made from gum wrappers and assorted commissary cosmetics, the prized transistor radio with the cigarette pack foil antennae and of course fresh packs of *store bought* smokes, usually mentholated Newports and Kools. To me they were full of shit right away, the religious masquerade, most of them, but not all of them. Others reached a level of personal integrity and honor there that may have eluded them on the streets. The jail-house is a crucible complete with a primal egalitarianism all its own based purely on a *survival of the fittest* model, doctors, lawyers, pawns and Indian chiefs all in this *us-against-them* and *all-against-all* Hobbesian catastrophe together. Then, the best in men can emerge as in a *stand up* guy who takes a comrade's back even when outnumbered and all but guaranteed a beat down or worse in the process, courage and honor at times, yes, even among thieves. Black, white, green or brown, it doesn't matter; character is a human thing and strictly personal. Underneath it all, we're all men, or at least aiming to be so when you have no audience and nothing counts but how you handle the *then* and *there* and it ain't about showing off, getting paid or even getting laid, it's about *who* and *what* you are when the chips are down, either way the truth emerges and becomes clear, reality distilled and everyone has to learn to live or not with it. You're a punk or you're a man, you pitch or catch, not much between. Sometimes it's as base and final as predator or prey. No denying or avoiding it. *Eat lunch or be lunch* as they say in the white-collar jungle. Maybe you can skip by once or twice, catch a pass, duck or slip in and out of the threatening miasma, but sooner or later the challenge comes up and there's no getting away from the ultimate and defining question: *what are you made of?* I didn't really care though, not then, not about bein' a man in jailhouse eyes, not about havin' the right nickname, not about havin' a clean cell or a pressed jail suit either, instead was narrowly focused on just one thing, getting out of there, not adapting by becoming a *somebody* in there which in my case would have required extraordinary dedication aimed at building muscle,

enhancing my capacity for cruelty and creating dependable alliances. To have them, coalitions, a crew of standup guys you can rely on you need, of course, to be one, come what may, that's how that works, especially inside the can. That's commitment. To me that's what the brothers and *Schmitty* had done so wrong, their fateful and fatal error, they embraced incarceration and dedicated themselves to mastering the *jailin' it* lifestyle with their proforma claims of innocence, their hammocks and cereal boxes, they got comfortable, adapted, card games, *durags* and precision *doowop* and with them sealed their fates. State soap, fistfights, bad food and a lot worse, much, much worse – they were gonna live there, indefinitely if not permanently, contentedly institutionalized. I could see it happening even to me, that quick view through the window but rejected it as soon as its harsh but oddly familiar contours began to shape, even as a natural adapter I wanted no part of this challenge. I just wanted to go home, ASAP, back to my buddies, back to my drugs and *Droogs*, back to the diner, Fireman's Field and to Sherry's poisonous kisses.

"*I don't care if you break!*" he kept saying as he pounded away at my chest. Bang! Bang! *Snap!* Pause, "*I don't care if you break!*" he repeated as he snapped and popped me again and again with his bare fists to the center of my chest, "*bus' yo' heart*" – snap! Snap! "*Bus' yo chest wide open!*" It hurt and although I had my fists raised to protect myself in vain he was way too tall and his reach way beyond mine, not in inches but in feet. He wanted me to wash his underwear – make me into his own personal *Maytag* as they called it, but I didn't care to and as he said he didn't care if I *broke*. Got it? Snap-snap, bang! Now he offered to pay me you understand, in cigarettes, but it was a nondeal, washing someone's underwear was one small step away from becoming his *bitch* which was not how Momma raised me – *Kabbo* wa'n't no bitch so I definitely didn't want to, but my chest was about to break and he didn't care. This very tall, lean, *Mod-Squad Link* lookin' ugly-ass villain seemed like he'd be more suited to playing schoolyard hoops than forcing an abandoned, sixteen year old, white kid into playing punk for him – but he was

making do. *Slim* they called him with his towering *afro* complete with the *black-power* plastic, fist shaped, rake comb they called a *pick* he wore like a crown adorning his *nappy-headed-skunk motherfuckin'* dome – he was the current and reigning *alpha male* on tier so after more than a few long minutes of feeble resistance I caved, not even a workout for him. My chest was already a pale pallet of ugly color: black, blue, purple and yellow from punches received in both battle and play days before and how much more it might take before it broke was a guess I didn't care to make but it was getting close, so I washed the underwear and smoked the cigarettes and prayed for release. Clearly this was gonna get worse before it got any better, that was clearly certain. All I could do was try to survive and keep whatever dignity possible before being let go or and released or killed. I forgive myself. Today, older and closer to a natural death maybe I'd crush his skull with a metal mop ringer in his sleep, join a coalition or pay the *Aryan Brotherhood* to put his lights out forever. That's *jailin' it*, y'know. There's always a way.

You-know-who – **1973**

We'd play Spades and chess for push-ups and smokes while at night locked in my cell I'd read, do more push-ups, sit-ups, leg-lifts and plan my glorious return to the cushy *Rock*, the fantasy silver lining. Few of my peers or friends even among the really bad kids ever did time, not even a thirty-day, skid-bid and returned to tell of it at the high-school parking lot picnic table where these stories would be pretty hard to top and without the usual exaggeration. Early one morning before breakfast while still asleep in my cell, head towards the bars as required, my wrist were grabbed out from under me and pulled through the bars, held fast by two firm fists and my forearm burned twice by the hot stings of two lit cigarettes. The sharp stabs of sudden pain were followed by the hideous sounds of a cackling fit of evil laughter which echoed through the hollow tier providing fitting background to my outraged shouts and curses, altogether a very rude awakening. Those small, eraser sized, ugly, white scars lasted for years while this tale of abuse and survival, except for the time being *maced in the face* a year before for entertainment by the cops at the Kingstontown, Jamaica police lockup, endures as the low-point of my incarceration, at least domestically. That said, the traveler's lowlight of indignity and pain was still, so far and by far safe in its inglorious place of suffering and degradation at the bottom of the record. More on that less than happy escapade later.

Visiting Day! Back at the local NCCC, my parents were treated to the sights of my bruises through the Plexiglas window in the visitor's booth, pulling away my shirt collar to reveal the multi-colored collage of my beaten chest, neck, and shoulders while flashing the blood stains coloring the whites of my eyes from more routine jail-boys-will-be-jail-boys at play. Man those were expensive windows, *right?* Here's what your *Remand for the 7-3030* looks like! *Happy now?* Maybe you'd be happier if I were *dead!?* Maybe next time you visit it will be to identify the body. What does the lawyer charge for *that?* And by the way, Jimmy's parents want to know *what the fuck is wrong with you two?* Was this your idea of teaching me a lesson? Maybe I should introduce you to *Slim* and you can put some money in his commissary account for his dedicated work on your

behalf as a teacher's aide? I could see the pain in my father's eyes, holding back tears and the dulled shock in my poor mother's face. It was killing them to watch me die slowly. Norman Rockwell never painted that kind of scene, too bad though, might have given him some interesting depth and dimension, anyway – but there they were, my tortured parents twice a week stuck between a rock, me, and a hard place – living with me. I get that. They did the best they could (a very low bar) and on their lawyer's advice followed his inexplicable to this day suggestion, begging the question: who leaves their kid in mortal danger *for any reason?* But there I sat, wounded in battles I was barely prepared to fight and suffering through pains actually brought largely if not completely on myself, though I didn't quite see it that way, being stuck in the childish world of righteous victim whose problems were everybody else's doing. So, there were no apologies or condolences forthcoming, not from me, just a ceaseless torrent of gratuitous and venomous accusations and blame, the cops, Sherry, *chimpface* and the world caused this, summed up inside by the cherished and well-worn phrase *fuck the world*.

Sherry never visited though; neither did any of my pals, thirty days, not even getting a letter from her. Jimmy, my crimee' though – he sent me a letter with a newspaper clipping from the local press detailing our crime, names, ages and locations, highlighting the incidental, factual errors, we were both charged with felonies, not just him, and now we were both famous – but her? Nothing. Not a visit, not a call, not a post card. Who could really blame her? My Stanley Kubrick scene was a bridge way too far, which she should have seen from day one, the first hospital visit. Who besides professional stunt men jump out of moving cars? I hada' be trouble. Maybe that was what attracted her, excitement, someone to do her teenage rebel thing for her while she watched safely from the *goody-two-shoes* sidelines. Her mother was ambivalent at best, though compassionate about the skull-splitting headaches, soothing my pounding head by stroking my temple with her warm, soft, motherly hand while laying it, moaning, in her lap, seeing how crushed and

helplessly hung-up on her daughter the tearing, two-dollar toughguy was, hopelessly concealed beneath the bravado, earring, cutoff denim jacket, and black, cleated boots – about her even seeing me at all, let alone visiting me in the slammer. That was far too bizarrely alien to her middle-class, stable, country-club world. I got that. *Yes*, it was understandable but *no*, not loyal or compassionate. Both her parents knew my condition, I loved her, could hardly breathe without her and in part for her and the insult, and imagined honor I was there. I even had to take the gold hoop earring out before entering the hallowed domain of her parents' house. An earring back in '74 was a sure sign the wearer was *Born Under a Bad Sign, ...to be Wild*. Back then only about five or six kids in my whole town had them – the really bad kids of which I was now undeniably and proudly one. That didn't impress her parents any, most of her prior boyfriends had been of the generic, nice, Jewish, *boy-next-door* stock, jocks, minor league brainiacs, future business and professional types, the typical. *Kabbo,* who in *she loves me* mode called *butchky* was her rebellious-stage and like so many other passive-aggressive, shit-eating types afraid to step out of line settled for someone else doing it for them so of course, regardless of their traditional liberalism a sixteen-year-old girl from that background and her parents have their limits where an inmate at the local county jail as a boyfriend was considerably beyond them. So, she never visited, never wrote, not a postcard while I, not wanting her to hear the pain and fear in my voice or risk the rejection of a collect call never tried. The pause left an impression though. Upon finally emerging from that crucible of suffering and penance my previously unyielding ardor and limitless teenage devotion to her had somewhat dimmed, only slightly, only temporarily but noticeably. Not only did I sense it but she picked up on it too, maybe calling a few minutes later than said I would (unthinkable) or perhaps even hung-up the phone without the obligatory and routine "*I love you*" closings (unimaginable) – not sure why, conceivably it was the distance created by her leaving me to the wolves so totally unsupported. Ironically, my confinement in a very small, dense, highly pressured space for just that long had expanded my world view, suggesting a

broader perspective, one where ordinary, everyday, romantic, teenage heartbreak no longer loomed so large or felt quite so existentially menacing or tragic. There were worse fates, one of which I had just struggled through and narrowly escaped from. Inmates get killed all the time in prison, even on *skid-bids* in county jails with the random arrangements of unsorted and sentenced offenders, it happens, toe tags without headlines. Anyway, back in the crucible, things were going about as bad as expected and feared, from real bad to real worse bad. .

One day after about three weeks on the tier a few of us white boys were passing the time with a semi-friendly game of jailhouse Spades. In general, white guys played with whites and blacks played with blacks, others like Latinos, well, they pretty much stuck with their own too though they seemed to mix more comfortably with gringos than negroes. Anyway, this particular afternoon game played for push-ups and cigarettes had none of the routine racial tensions running undercurrent you might find in a mixed game but there was something else though less pronounced and obvious just as insidious, poisoning the otherwise casual pastime. I didn't like Richie and Richie, the longhaired white boy "falsely" accused of rape, well, he didn't like me much either. It wasn't the rape charge that bothered me so much as it was more the way the big, big enough to subdue any *lady* and take her by force white kid with the cowboy boots *and* the rape charge postured up and down the tier like he was all that – like he was some sort of white-boy, rough neck villain while the fact was that he was only appeared as rough and tough as the other inmates, particularly the darker ones in the majority here were willing to tolerate and we all knew it – but he didn't seem to and that was very annoying, posturing chest out, day after day, head cocked a bit and with a slight rhythmic bop to his step, especially to those of us who kept our postures more or less in line with our capabilities under these limiting circumstances. He'd laugh too loud and *talk too much shit.* We were waiting for one or more of them to burst his rapist bubble, until then he, like a lot of other routine irritations had to be put up with more or less. After

beating him at cards and watching him count out the push-ups it appeared, in fact it seemed quite clear that I could out *push-up* or *sit-up* him in my sleep if I had to. He'd grunt after twenty when that was when I would just be warming up. That fun fact gave me some misplaced confidence that at the physical level, despite the significant size difference that I was more than his match. When it came to calisthenics, pushups for example? I'm good for at least 50 a clip before breakfast and at least ten one-handed easily, and a hundred sit-ups a clip too. No sweat. As it turned out though, that calculated misjudgment proved a dangerously false comfort.
Turns out though it was actually *butchky* who talked too much shit that day. Shit that it turned out I couldn't back up, checks I couldn't cash, *wolf tickets* as they say. It was during the card game, a dispute over tactics or scoring challenges turned to threats when fueled by my ill-placed, push-up based bravado told him something about "*breaking bones*," his, and stared him right in the eye while saying it – looking up didn't bother me – I could out *push* and *sit-up* him by miles a clip so his ass ought to be mine it seemed clear. With that we both moved quickly away from the table and squared off face to face or face to chest where *jerkoff* threw a front *snap-kick* which I caught with both hands, grabbing him by the ankle then jerked his leg upwards knocking him off balance before bringing us both down. Once scrapping on the floor and eliminating his height advantage, some how, as a natural wrestler got him in my tightest headlock. After several moments of rolling around on the hard jailhouse floor huffing and puffing and struggling for control and dominance I found myself tiring as it was he who seemed to be just warming up. Holding on for dear life now it was like riding a bronco busting two hundred pound bull so it was only now a matter of who was gonna give out first. By this time I'm squeezing his head and neck with all I got hoping to cut off his oxygen supply long enough for him to whither into submission giving me a chance to change tactics to something more penetrating and damaging, like gouge his fuck'n eyes out with my fingers, whatever. My forearms turned red and swelled to twice their normal size, tightening and straining to choke the life out of him, desperately trying to keep my grip from eroding

with him still bucking and gasping for breath, eventually my arms numb from blood expansion and exertion gave out and released. At ~140 lbs with a welterweight's frame and physique, Charlie Manson size (who, unlike me apparently had a knack for jail, developed when he was still quite young) I wasn't quite built for jail nor did I care to muscle up and adjust, a lesson learned in *Gladiator School*. That was all she wrote, now exhausted before I could scramble back up on my feet, *innocent rapist* man jumped up springing into action, now above me commenced to use his cowboy boots, heels first to pound my head into the floor, his full weight behind each stomping blow into my face, neck and forehead hammering the back of my head on the unyielding ground, first stunned then numbed after the first of several well-placed and brutal pounds. By the fourth or fifth, it was probably the brothers who had initially gathered around to watch the show that then grabbed him and held him off as others, probably my card-partners picked me up and helped me to my cell, dazed. This was no *Saturday Night Main Event* in jailhouse terms, just a fairly routine dustup, probably only a pound or two more away from a coma or worse so nobody said anything to anybody, we all just went about our businesses as if the only thing that mattered was when the next episode of *As The World Turns* would be coming on (as in like "*was Dick finally gonna get down with Jane – still so damn relevant*" – Gil Scott Heron-style) or what was on tonight's menu for desert. Here we clocked time between meals by the start and finish of the daytime soaps, yeah, the *toughguys* watch the house-wive's soap operas with a serious dedication. It's not like they break down and sob when Bridget loses the baby but they definitely get immersed, makes sense if that and a cowboy novel's the best you can do to escape, anyway, its just another bizarre irony that hadn't escaped my notice. But *dirty 'bert* was gonna be out of commission for a while, lying face up on my rack now only half in a daze so the next episode of *As The World Turns* and later, more fitting and far more entertaining *The Untouchables* would have to be watched with out *Yo Ten Cell*'s presence and reliably illuminating editorial comments. I probably laid on my rack like that until the next morning, the worst was over I figured so didn't see any reason to

make any moves just yet, in fact, the falsely accused rapist even seemed a bit wary as he cautiously looked in on me in while passing my cell, probably considering I might *rat* or otherwise succumb to the permanent abyss via a brain hemorrhage and he'd catch another charge which also happens all the time but that wasn't gonna happen, not with me, not this time. I knew the deal, this was jail, I might shank him or more likely foster a coalition to throw him a *blanket party* but *rat?* No. Again, this was jail, "*if you don't like it"* as they say, "*don't come to jail."* Damn straight. Don't come to jail. AbsoFuckenLutely. Well I didn't like it and wasn't planning on coming back but for then, the now; there we were, so the rules, the real ones like *never rat* were the rules and were dependably enforced. What for anyway? *Vengeance?* Of course. But there are better ways. Much better. Here it seemed most of us at least finally discovered an identity that fit, one we could latch on to and accept, *convict*, *outlaw, bad guy, Black Bart* and we'd learn to obey them for once, the rules. Ironic again how in jail it appeared as if we strove to be upright, citizen inmates, convicts scrupulously following the unwritten, savage code. *Never rat*. Period. Die first. Meanwhile, ratting or not ratting wasn't necessary. At a routine hourly headcount a CO must have noticed my injuries (easy to spot, impossible to miss) and soon, probably the next day was pulled off the tier and placed in PC, Protective Custody or as is more commonly known and aptly described *solitary*. Inmates called it *Punk City* and probably out of respect for the unwritten code the COs never even asked me, *who, how* or *why*. Nothing. I didn't care; really, all that mattered was staying alive long enough to make it home. That though – the move was only after the mandated trip to NCMC, the local hospital conveniently located adjacent to the jail house in the next lot, the Nassau County Medical Center where they walked me publicly through the crowded hallways of beanbag citizens, armed guards on each side, handcuffed and leg-ironed to be examined and X-rayed. That humiliation, even at sixteen was so overwhelming I tried to lose myself in a public enemy-at-large fantasy, *John Dillinger the notorious window buster*. That's a stroll I'm not likely to forget but somehow the X-rays showed no

significant internal injuries that time wouldn't heal. It's a wonderful thing being sixteen years old, today that type of beating would take casts, wiring, surgery and months to heal from, if ever. All that was needed then though was a little rest, in fact I'd taken a worse beating or two from schoolmates and street kids before that, my dad even tossed me more than twice or thrice with almost similar gusto (minus the injuries, the physical ones) but as far as the overall record of *whoopasses* and stompings in life up to then not many had the memorable ferocity of that one. By way of compensation though I retain quite a few valuable lessons from that *School of Hard Knocks* exercise, among them: even when tempted by confidence and rage, talk a little less shit, rather let's say dispense with threats *lock, stock and barrel* altogether, instead carry a big stick, a sharp blade or a loaded gun, and most importantly the will to use them. Save the talk. I'm still not beyond issuing a rare, fair warning, telling a frustrating citizen who pushes me to the edge "*I'll leave you in a pool of your own blood!*" and mean it, sort of, but, as the brothers called it, the *'bert be talkin' big shit* guy, well, he be talkin' big shit a lot less after that. Today, before taking action it's better to take the measure of an opponent from a variety of dimensions and considerations, *push-ups* and *sit-ups* contests not withstanding, they only factor in after size, speed and strength and of course ferocity and determination for as Sun Tzu advises always: *know your enemy, know yourself and know the terrain*. I only knew me or thought so and was significantly wrong on that measure, while it's best when possible to cover all three as accurately can be. Instead of threatening him it'd been better to have laughed the whole discussion off with a joke and a shrug, kept my pride in check and continued with the game. He could have been clobbered, badly, anytime at my discretion. Blanket parties aren't held by invitation, they're surprise parties, like Pearl Harbor so options were plentiful and almost all of them better than being seduced into destruction by one's own childish ego. The yeshivas should have been teaching *The Art of War* to the young of a persecuted people early on, way before or at least along side multiplication tables and the Aramaic code of the Gemarah, and maybe for after school boxing or karate like I

wanted instead of enduring tortuous piano lessons from a withered, old, European spinster hag with bad breath and sloppy makeup, all of which were understandably dreaded and hated.

The weird thing about stir, at least where they had me, was that it was only solitary for part of the time. My lonely little eight by ten foot corner of the world where they kept *off-the-charts* psychos and those in need of protection housed not only little *butchky*, still waiting for the infamous *7-3030 Test,* but *weekend warriors* as they were called, those whose crimes weren't bad enough for full time penance but yet still too bad for plain old probation or any other form of customary wrist slaps like fines or community service. And the worst thing about stir, at least for me was not the lack of companionship but the lack of walking space. You tend to lie down a lot because there really ain't no place to go – it's a locked cell, like B-Floor again so after you get done pacing and after you pace some more, you sit, then pace, then sit, then, eventually after pacing and sitting some more you lie down. Not many more options except maybe running in place for a spell but how long and how often can you really do that without going nuts? That's where the trouble really starts. Most people lie down for about a half hour before they fall asleep and maybe for a few minutes after they wake up but try lying down fully awake for hours on end. Your back starts to ache in all kinds of strange ways, not a lifting something too heavy thrown out of whack type of ache but a dull spasm of discomfort spreading from vertebrae to vertebrae to your hips, pelvis, upper thighs and shoulders, man wasn't meant to live in an eight by ten space but there they placed me for my own protection, a boy living in an eight by ten still waiting for the elusive *7-3030 Test* which I suspected was somehow purposely delayed until the end of the term, the second *thirty* as in *thirty days* so as to drive home the point at whatever cost of *where this was* and *what lay in store* if I didn't get the message and my mind right this time, which I partially did: *stay out of jail (as a minor) – stay out of Gladiator School*.

When the weekend rolled around it was like a stranded and lonesome Robinson Crusoe watching his *Good Man Friday* saunter in to the mini cellblock sporting his freshly pressed, jailhouse blues and clean, white, leather sneakers, a low ranking, bus-taking, wannabe associate of one of local *wise-guy* crews, a half retarded looking, skinny, John Travolta type a few years my senior who swore he had style and wanted everyone at the Nassau County Correction Center to know it too where as far as I was concerned? As long as he didn't think he found in me his *soul mate* then yeah, sure, he had lots of jailhouse style, whatever. *Got any smokes?* And I recognized the guy from the streets, "the world" as they say on the inside. I would see him on odd occasions hanging around the *Nathan's* hamburger pavilion, playing pinball in the game room, or waiting at the bus stop across the street on the infamous and often traveled Long Beach Road which ended at the boardwalk and south shore beach, never spoke to him though, he was just too weird for me even with my preference for *half-crazed* criminal *companiero* types with street names like *Snake, O.Z.* and *Cochise,* but here? This weekend in stir and from his cell adjacent to mine it was great to have company, even his, a familiar face and figured it was time we got formally introduced and caught up. So, favorite movies, rock groups, songs, jokes, crimes, clubs, discos and bars, legends of *toughguy* celebrities, fights, lame lawyers, best drugs, good lawyers, easy judges, bad judges, bails and jails, cars and chicks, the usual breakdown of what's what and who's who and it went on all weekend 'til it all but ran dry and we started repeating ourselves and making stuff up. He was friendly and goofed around while sharing his smokes and posturing for me about who he was and who he knew, all pretty much true. The disconnect between how impressed he was with his bus fare gangster credentials while watching him, detached, boasting about them from the edge of his toilet seat, pants gathered at the knees, flicking butt ashes behind the pale green prison bars was entertaining. PC had no TV but no matter, he listened when I spoke and I returned the same common courtesy. It was really good having someone to talk with, big time relief and so different than straight up solitude, another white guy from nearby, a

homie and come Monday morning that's where he was going, back home to *the world.* He was doing *weekends* for some unspecified crime which we never brought up, hardly mattered but whatever petty, bullshit infraction it mighta' been no one left him there, certainly not his mother and father and lawyer to be beaten near into a coma or have cigarettes put out on his arms while waiting for a bullshit test no one needed to really give or take. Yeah, we spoke about the untaken test when I offered to give him the results sight unseen right now: here was an *angry*, *rebellious, hurt, rejected* and *abandoned reckless* teenager. Period. Mystery solved. Test over. Case closed. Not so complicated, maybe a little more extreme than most outsider kids but nonetheless unremarkable especially for 1974, age of the *Symbianese Liberation Army*, the *Weather Underground* and the *Black Panther Party* framing the *Vietnam* and *Watergate* fiascos*,* me and a couple of older, envy-driven drunken buddies threw rocks through expensive windows, *criminal mischief*. Not really complicated at all. No county-funded, court-appointed PhD specialists needed. Anyway, I digress, we got along, the weekend passed swiftly and with his arrival and departure was beginning to see some glimmer of light through my bruised eyelids, swollen jaw and battered brow. It seemed now that the end was closer than the beginning a least for this chapter. I also knew that if I ever saw him on the streets again or in the game room at *Nathan's* I'd just pass him by like before, maybe we'd nod, maybe we wouldn't, fine either way, strangers we'd remain the way it was probably supposed to be. After all this was incarceration, he was my neighbor, a fellow outcast, another middle-class white guy while I was still the legendary rebel and dangerous dropout *Kabbo* and though I far from hated him, he was alright, even now a pal and time sped up the like the rapid end of an hour glass flow as soon as he entered the realm he was still just too weird, his high pitched voice, slow speech and often disconnected look in his eye, barely ever making direct contact to befriend in any other space. PC in the NCCC was exactly the type of place you'd expect to cross path with an oddball character like him and so we did and so it was. One of us was a rock-throwing, heart-broken, noble-street savage who looked

you dead in the eye when he threw a punch and the other a white-sneakered, half-retarded-lookin' hair slicked back, bus-takin' mafioso-*wannabee*, a low-end criminal doing weekends for an unspecified crime in the joint. That's that. *Yeah* we intersected but *no* we didn't align and no, we never introduced ourselves by name. This was jail and that was fine.

As the hours of the term after nearly a month dwindled down to a *skid-bidder's* few and my wounds were on the mend, and as the "thirty" in *7-3030* was approaching, meaning it was coming up soon, so would I be soon getting out and going home. I still *hated Dave*, loved my friends, agonized over *she loves me not* Sherry and blamed the world for my woes, but by the time my local *homie* rolled up his rack and made for the gate on Monday morning leaving for the world, again I finally began to sense some palpable relief. Within days or hours, not weeks or months the long-awaited test would be administered, I'd be declared sane or insane, a routine rebel without a cause, whatever, and it would be back to the world for me too. It was springtime and I'd be wild and free once more, I felt it in my young blood and I'd be wiser if not saner, if not completely whole still greater than the sum of my parts. Kabbo returns, a survivor, fiercer than ever and more of a legend for having made it through a stint in Gladiator School, so, lying back on my rack in my tightly pressed prison blues, almost comfortable, drifting off into familiar reverie, beginning to adapt despite my resistance, just as I no longer needed to, lit a smoke and felt content again, almost, just to still be alive.

Kabbo '76

"*Is this the real life, is this just fantasy, caught in a land slide – no escape from reality…*" (Farrokh Bulsara)

A sentencing

To say *it feels like yesterday* would be *cliché* and I hate clichés, especially living one so refuse to use them, at least not comfortably, unless absolutely necessary but they're usually not so avoid them as often as possible. It doesn't feel like *yesterday*, it feels like a long, long time ago in a place I never want to return but here we go anyway, with words, clichés and all as the story must be told just as it's heard in my head, as closely as memory and humility permit. So, with that, dear random reader here it is.

July 9th 1976, not a big date for some, not for most, just a few days after the big deal bicentennial bash everybody was so categorically hyped about. I heard about it too, yeah, *America the beautiful* and all, two hundred years of red, white and blue, *rah, rah, rah*, sail boats and old schooners on parade in the New York harbor, cannons, fireworks and made up patriotic ballyhoo, a commercial extravaganza bigger than the last twenty Christmases combined but I wasn't buying in, not a dime of it and not for a minute, couldn't. Could not. For me the big bash was spent contemplating a worrisome calendar date, specifically a court date with a judge, a sentencing for a real criminal case in Nassau County. They were sending me *away* somewhere, definitely off the streets, that was made clear. Exactly where and for how long was still a mystery though. I was *told*, word leaked out from somewhere deep within the legal channels to me to prepare myself, that after my case adjourned that morning I would not be going home, not even a quick pit-stop so pack a toothbrush and say my *goodbyes*, period. *The Fourth of July* of '76 was no fancy celebration for me, no, none at all, it was

just a few days before a stare down with state sanctioned punitive measures, justified or otherwise which I was gonna lose, not by blinking but by reality, definite incarceration of some type for sure, maybe even jail, who knew which, so fuck all that *phony, happy, firecracker horseshit* I thought, yeah, yeah, all of it, fuck it, *America the beautiful* my sorry young ass, yeah, so shoot off the old iron cannons, hoist the big white sales and wave the star-fucking, spangled *Betsy Ross* banner but that's that, you do it, I wasn't having any, no, none of it. A *sentencing*, a court date for a *sentencing*, musta' been out in my PO's custody, no phony, cheap-ass, patriotic five and dime Chinatown bought and paid for with pennies sentimentalism, paper flags and low-end, weak-ass, Cherry Bombs and M80s for me but a *sentencing*, doing some kinda' fuck'n *time*, a real fucking explosion, an unavoidable one. My world for better and worse was about to be ripped away from me, me torn from it, whichever, but that's what was headlining on the dreaded, morning of that early summer day just after high-school's end. A sentencing.

Barry Burnstein, that was his name, a kid from the same town Sherry was from, Oceanside, the same town I swore total and complete vengeance on. Yes, the whole town. Anyone who had the nerve to *be* or even *look* happy from there was marked fair game. The home of my cruel teenage tormentress and those who she preferred were prime targets for revenge for my shattered and aching heart, both *vena cavas*, both savagely ruptured and painfully bleeding when all I could do for relief was lash back out, spread the pain, so pot dealing Burnstein found himself in the line of my venomous fire by letting it leak out to his close circle and eventually out to me in the next town that he had the much valued, highly sought, exotically potent *Thai Stick* for sale. Big mistake. His. Who knows how word got to me but it did, any longhaired kid busted repeatedly by seventeen was in the local underground loop of who scored what, the market and the word was *Burnstein had Thai.* Thai Sticks were known to be very strong and hence very expensive strains of the *Merry-Jew-Wanna* plant so were actively and

aggressively sought by *ganja* aficionados with more than the usual amounts of cash to spend and they were rare so the information caught my attention and interest right away. While I might not have had enough cash I sure had enough interest, will and the desperate nerve to act. All else that was needed were dependable wheels and a small posse, just one or two guys. Burnstein it appeared was a fellow, local, drug dealing Hebe so probably just another spoiled, middle-class, suburban, white kid who got the money to buy the `erb in the first place not from mowing lawns or delivering newspapers but from an allowance he got from his hardworking, first generation parents thus seemed reasonably negotiable, meaning less risky, no *Murder Incorporated* executioner there, not likely to shoot me dead in the act or come after me later with big guns, rather he was more likely to just write it off, the loss, *easy come easy go.* All things quickly considered he and his weed were designated *high value* targets in my now intensified efforts to not only get high and stay high but to leave a lasting and notorious name for myself in Oceanside before being swept away by the looming and inexorable currents of the county courts.

Greenhouse 1976 – third from left – front row.

As far as lasting reps my name sure wasn't going to be left in any high-school yearbook besides *Greenhouse's* – the "alternative"

Rockville Center high-school set up for delinquents and potential dropouts which I still managed to be *expelled* from for innumerable transgressions including a weekend they took us away upstate where we managed to smuggle booze and drink ourselves into oblivion before trashing the cabins set aside for us as dorms – big damage including ripping the toilets from floors and tearing sheetrock panels from the walls. Hell, what's more fun than a raging barrel of teenage, alcoholic, degenerates on a country weekend paid for by the school? Anyhow, the score fit the mission. My name might as well be left somewhere ominous and memorable on the streets aside from the train station graffiti marking *Kabbo* territory which lingered for years but with limited impact and as a long-shot bonus maybe it would get back to Sherry and she'd realize how wrong she was and how much she hurt me and maybe change her heart and so heal mine. No, the logic isn't there; it was pure ruptured gut and savage instinct like with everything else in my world at seventeen, an aching gut and the blinding agony of cluster headaches all the way, my wounded soul and inflicting pain anywhere and on anyone possible the only route to possible relief.

The Score

Big Mark Connors of the upscale section of upper scale Rock on the other hand was an all-American *winner* type, not a chap I'd be likely to cross or even cross paths with or ever think to recruit were it not for the timely confluence of odd events, most of whose details, aside those described so far, if I ever even knew or cared about, well, they're long forgotten by now. Musta' been through the mischievous leprechaun, the lanky teenage Fondue who by then was living at another friend's house, Generous Jeff's, a close neighbor of the country-club Kane's and right next door to the mighty Connors family of business tycoons, star athletes, class presidents and cheerleaders, the white Smiths, where we speculated he was probably doing a *Mrs. Robinson* with the ol' lady of the house in exchange for room and board. Clean-cut, broad shouldered

respectable Connors though? I don't know if he was star quarterback or class president or both or neither but whichever title he held or almost held or never even came close to holding, for sure he was definitely well embraced within the tight circle of that traditionally elite suburban category of Beach Boy, blond-haired, clean shaven surfer dudes, GTO convertible, fucked all the cheerleaders, scum fellas everybody likes and admires or envies and loves to hate or some combination thereof. At least I did. Hate, envy. Same things, but mostly envy. I couldn't live right; he could and was good at it. But this night, beyond any of that it was Mark, me and the other rogue, *goodtime Charlie* dropout, the aforementioned Fondue, still a steady crony of mine and one of the original four *Droogs* that musta' recruited him. Upon prompt arrival at zero-hour, just after dark, outside and slightly down the street from my parents' modest three bedroom mansion I boarded Beach Boy's trendy, US Post Office surplus jeep painted camouflage olive, *shotgun*, no questions asked and once again led by young yours truly we quickly forged a onetime posse of focused *crimees*, cohorts in criminality. On its face? A vague specter of odd confederates but we were definitely out to score and with only that one goal in mind the picture was vivid and clear. One afternoon a couple of years before me and Fondue were cutting across a corner lawn on our ways home from school when the lady of the house caught us midway and started giving us some shit about *trespassing*. As she was dressing us down and we were about to yell *fuck you, old bitch*, laugh, curse her out and keep going, she changed her mind and tone deciding to hire us instead to clean up and out her garage and put up a low wooden fence she had laying around across her lawn that would discourage future trespassers. She musta' been crazy or desperate, or bored or all three. As always, needing beer and drug money we agreed. Mistake. Hers. About ten minutes into the process of rummaging through her cluttered and dusty property we discovered liquid gold in the form of several stacked cases of warm beer parked in a shadowy back corner, Knickerbocker bottles, the cheapest out there but good enough, so naturally decided to crack open and help ourselves to a few in order that the work detail include a *party*

element. After soaking up a few of those unexpectedly satisfying aperitifs we proceeded to disengage from the labor detail entirely exchanging it for pure *party* by ransacking the rest of the garage instead, searching for anything else she might have that would either get us higher now or sell to help us stay high later. Vandalism and looting were our favorite teenage pastimes, a lot easier and more fun than homework or sports team practices. Believe me. Kicks baby. *Fuck everybody.* That's our motto. Catching us again and realizing her misjudgment she reverted to harridan, cursing, threatening and all but called the cops, now running but still laughing, pockets stuffed with unopened bottles we narrowly escaped another self-inflicted head trauma courtesy the RVCPD.

That was probably the only time feral Fondue and compact Kabbo ever hung out solo together as a duo. With that episode under our belts along with several more, both after and before but conducted in cahoots with other *crimees* we reinforced our bad-boy *bona fides* to each other and so were well acquainted with our shared bent towards risky criminal, potentially violent tendencies, so in that regard we were an established team of two, now three. When they first rolled up early that summer evening though? Fondue riding shotgun, it was definitely a big, happy surprise to see that young Captain America the quarterback, the big upright popular *jock* had a dark side too and that he'd posse up with the likes of me, *Kid Kabbo* from the opposite edge of the social hierarchy, he a hero and probably knew of my rep if for no other cause by the Newsday article, my claim to inglorious fame as an *anti* to the bone. *What a gas!* Beach Boy was *criminal* too. *What a kick!* Just like lil' ol' *bad-boy* the drop-out me. With another pair of able hands and dependable wheels, though now a three-way split, as a special bonus he was big enough to be physically intimidating should we need that type of backup, wheels and muscle, both welcomed contributions to the game plan. On that aspect and in contrast, as a welterweight sized imitation tough-guy I usually had to raise the stakes sky-high by going all the way to posing as *deadly* to be intimidating, crazily unhinged and ruthlessly determined for effect while the big fella' could just stand there

calmly and look imposingly serious. Surprise surprise. We'd never shared a word between us before and none since, no opportunity or reason to connect, a school sports fan I wasn't and he wouldn't have been caught dead hanging out with us *burnouts* at the corner picnic table but now there he was, down with risk and on this field at least that night as bears repeating once again *Kabbo* confidently led the pack, I was the quarterback calling the plays. With Fondue dutifully taking the back seat and me taking *shotgun*, our impromptu gang of three was fully convened for our high stakes adventure. As Beach Boy stepped on the gas and the jeep drove off, it felt as if I'd somehow been promoted up the outlaw ranks, now having a high-school superstar as my *wheelman*, yeah, mine. It was, after all, my caper, so I really needed to make it happen. It was my hit. I conceived and set it up, so hit I would as point-man and strong-arm, Fondue as backup and lookout, and Connors as *get there* and *get away* while backing up the backup. Having never hung out with Connors before seeing him preparing for action that night and the quiet way he just took instruction made me understand in part why he stood out and scored so often on the football field, along with size and speed he played to win – no ego, accomplish the task, score the touchdown, take the Thai Sticks, just drive to get it done. Whatever. And though Fondue was always a wildcard, not terribly reliable or even very sturdy, in fact he might cave, rat, or flinch he desperately wanted *smoke*, always did and would do what it took to get it, I could depend on that and I could depend on me, so, if Burnstein actually showed he would be taken, crime would be committed and it would pay, he was going down and the Sticks would be ours, mine, posse or not, I was fully committed. Yes, tonight crime would pay. Can you even commit a *crime* against a criminal, a high-school drug dealer from another town? Is ripping him off, even with force or the threat of force an actual crime? He was dealing weed to high-school kids, is there even such a violation of Criminal Code on the books? Robbing a drug dealer? While it may have briefly crossed my mind, the technical legalities, I didn't really care; all I cared about was scoring the weed, takin' the risk and sending a message, taken'm without payin' for'm and taken'm

by force and by so doing add another fresh scalp to my ever growing wall of cursed, Oceanside trophy victims and as a special bonus *you-know-who* might even hear about it.

The rest of the story is pretty *matter-of-fact*; the score went almost exactly as planned, barely missing a beat with only one or two brief moments of unexpected, minor-league drama. The three of us rolled up to a stop along the mostly empty street in front of the Oceanside High School, parking about a half block from the designated pickup point where I got out. It was quiet, early summer so there was little or no activity at the school, a sprawling, brick, two-story factory looking complex which housed about two thousand kids when fully activated but tonight since it was basically closed for summer, school was out and aside maybe a dozing janitor it was empty, not another soul to see or be seen by in sight. Perfect. I strolled calmly away from the jeep across the lawn and towards the thick row of dense shrubbery, neatly planted bushes that closely lined the entire front of the school building, covering the wall just outside and below the ground floor classroom windows. They were tall enough though, about five or six feet high, tall enough and thick enough to shield any activity going on behind them from the view of the street, nosey passersby or possible window watching spectators from the neat, compact homes facing them on the street's opposite side. That was where we agreed to meet and make the exchange, behind the shrubs up by the main doors, convenient and discrete. Calm as cake with my crew out of view and on alert I took position. By plan we arrived deliberately early, maybe twenty minutes before them so they wouldn't see us pull up, that way even if he brought back-up I'd appear alone. The idea was to keep him at ease, guard down, so as far as he could tell there was nobody with me and no preparation for any kinda' quick getaway, as if I'd showed up alone and on foot as one might normally – fewer people, fewer agendas, fewer witnesses. Easy street. Why not? Once the pieces were in place, ready and waiting, breathing deeply, adrenaline flowing, but keeping a lid, massaging the pocketed, thick, iron links rankling gently in my caressing right hand, he didn't make me wait long. Moments after

taking position another car pulled up and parked just about ten yards in front of the jeep. There he was, on time and as agreed. After emerging from the *shotgun* seat he right away spotted me in the shadows just behind the hedges, at first without any visible outward acknowledgment strolled casually towards the spot. In the narrow dirt space between the building and the brush, now standing only a few short feet from each other, face to face, both of us shielded from outside view behind the bushes I recognized him, yup, it was him, we met once before. Since the deal and plans were made solely by phone, one brief call: $100 for five sticks, time and location, despite my intentional targeting it wasn't absolutely certain from just that call that it was he, the dude from the party. We'd been introduced a few weeks back by another local, sketchy, young guy, a mutual acquaintances who made such connections. It was at a house party, and in that first passing encounter, sized him up for possible future reference, and the pertinent information was shared – namely that we were both *cool* as in willing to quietly break the law for the sake of drugs, money and getting high. Focusing in, yes, it was he, Burnstein, the dude I expected. Not that it mattered so much at the time, there weren't any Thai Sticks in the picture just then and deals like these were the main point of those many and frequent introductions and gatherings, *connections.* Now only the score mattered, the Thai Sticks and taking them mattered, but before making my move quickly took it all in again. Thin, soft, smug, hippie-looking, longhaired and despite my appearing alone and compact size he seemed appropriately cautious in manner but not cautious enough in practice. The indispensable key to success was Burnstein having no suspicion of my plan or any other suggestive clue to my intention, specifically not being alone or unarmed. Had he? It'd never have gone this far. The plan was working, so far so good. Regardless of all the inherent, unavoidable risks, cops, criminals and chaos, after looking behind, to the sides and then ahead towards me he arrived on location with the prize in hand, wrapped and ready. While my focused posse kept an eye on the action and me from the anonymous obscurity of the jeep parked less than half a block down the road, the two of us faced each other close

up again, only a short time after the house party but this time in the field of action, the shadows of the shrubs. It was clear once they pulled up that he wasn't alone, there was at least a driver with him, he might have had unseen others ducked in the back seat or possibly even a second car just in case of whatever – like we did – who may have gotten there earlier still, or he may have been armed and prepared for battle, so I was cautious too, luring him into range, playing it friendly, greeting him with the pretense of *eager, polite* and *grateful anticipation,* putting him further at ease until he was positioned exactly as tactical demands required, close, cornered behind the bushes, out of sight and against the wall – striking distance. Now, less than two feet from me, face to face, reaching into my deep, front cargo-pants pocket grabbed a handful of menace, the buried iron chain whose bulge was hidden by my oversized sweatshirt, then slowly withdrew my tight fist wrapped in the links of heavy metal. Eyeballing the steady gesture as I intended, him focusing now on every slight detail, at first he seemed confused until revealing a further few inches of weighted, heavy, bad news, when he then understood; it wasn't a wallet in my hand, it was a robbery, he'd been set up and now there was fear, my favorite. Pulling the rest all the way out until the full length was completely liberated, dangling from my relaxed arm, allowing him to fully sense all eighteen inches and weight, its meaning clarified by my expression of focused resolution, my message, the threat, free and ready to swing, an instant from it crashing down hard against his forehead if need be, splitting open his face from brow to chin, with an almost gentle hint of urgency just above a whisper, quietly, sincerely, like the Turk calmly told Tom Hagen "*I'm a business man Tom, blood is a big expense*" like cold, sweet cake said: "*if you value your life you'll hand me the sticks"* and then that's exactly what he did. Not a beat lapsed. Handed them to me. Just like that. No questions asked. I had a rep, a crazy kid from the next town, *Kabbo,* which he ignored or musta' doubted until now when it was right in his face, so wisely chose not to challenge it. Having come too far to return to my boys empty handed or worse, we both seemed to know he was gonna get cracked bad and lose the Sticks anyhow

and maybe some teeth as well if he made the wrong choice. Good. No reason to hurt the guy if there was no reason to hurt the guy. So, grabbing the bag from his extended hand I emerged from the shadows of the bushes back onto the open, street lamp lit lawn almost as casually and calmly as entering them, while Burnstein made a quick dash for the car he pulled up in. Again, as soon as they rolled up, parked and he got out it was clear he wasn't alone, with another guy maybe in back seat it was three on three, but this wasn't a beach volleyball game or gang-fight, this was intended to be quiet, quick and clean so it didn't make any difference, he was marked to be taken anyway even with the other passenger or passengers, that was why Fondue and Beach Boy were there, so I just kept walking towards the jeep only slightly stepping up my pace to limit any possible damage from any surprises but without appearing panicked or doing anything else that might attract attention. Stepping off the curb and onto the road right before getting almost close enough to grab the door handle and climb in, and with my mark and his pals already inside theirs his driver shifted into reverse and floored it backwards endeavoring with that dramatic gesture to back full throttle into us and maybe mow me down or just slam into us before I could step up and escape safely into the jeep which would only have taken a few more split seconds, we were that close. With their engine now racing and wheels frantically spinning Lady Luck would further have it that night that the suddenness and force of the backwards thrust made their rear wheels spin tractionless on some loose grass, trash and wet leaves providing me with just enough more time to scramble double quick inside the jeep, slam the door and for Captain Quarterback the *wheel man* to shift out of neutral, u-turn outa' there and speed us three and the weed safely away though with them now in hot pursuit. By the way? The *getaway* is one of the most thrilling of all rides `cause you never know. Loved it. Life or death. Do or die. Don't tread on me. With an ecstatic Fondue in the back seat keeping his eye on them and reporting back to us and Mark focused on the wheel, it was now all up to the *homecoming king* to earn his cut. Jeeps aren't built for speed but they are sturdy enough that if they have to take a hit or absorb a shock on the road

they can do it and keep moving meaning traffic laws and possible collisions weren't deterrents. By about four blown stop signs and at least one red traffic light they stopped pursuing us and it became clear they weren't going to follow us back to our home turf, the cursed *Rock*, at least not then. Big Mark went for the end-zone, scored his touchdown and with that his keep was earned and thus went our first, last and only score as a team. Success. Free weed. Thai-stick weed. I felt like a mastermind, a brokenhearted mastermind with some strong cannabis scored for free and a looming July 9th sentencing date rapidly approaching, only days away, a date, which would be my last for a while of anything free.

Back to the gloom

As a matter of fact the sentencing wasn't just my sad fate, it was Hartley's too, Robert Assface Hartley, that other seventeen year old Beatle haircut'd *fucknutfaggot* who ratted me out – he was either already gone or well on his way when he ratted me to the cops, a burglary. Truth be told though, like the sixteen year old insecure, showoff, fool self being me at the time, practically ratted myself out a year earlier, bragged about it to my PO without of course going into specific cases, just mentioned that I had *done a burglary*, brandishing my criminal credentials like they were Boy Scout *merit-badges* letting him know exactly what a noble, street-savage renegade he was dealing with here. When Hartley got popped a year or so later doing another break-in and probably untold and unsolved more, well, to cop a plea the rat confirmed it, our event, went into specifics, named names, all of them, places he robbed and people he robbed with, *crimees*, including me, mine and ours. Bad. Very bad. I'd catch up with Ratface a few years later when he strolled casually into a local RVC gin-mill one afternoon, our regular the New Village Inn where me and a few of my *me go to parties good time Charlie* pals were spending a relaxing afternoon of casual, routine, inebriation. Watching him enter behind me through the barroom mirror he headed directly to the Men's Room, either not noticing or

deliberately ignoring me. It wasn't clear and didn't much matter. His fate was all but sealed either way. As soon as I heard the heavy door close I disengaged from my stool and followed behind him into the *head* where after a word or two, holding back a fit quietly advised, the Turk again, "*I'm a little angry at you*" – offering the dude the chance to fall to his knees and apologize, explaining that he *was cornered and terrified* and *forever sorry so please forgive me – here Kabbo – the drinks are on me* – which might have defused the tension, instead he did the opposite, glaring at me with a *fuck you* expression on his face, adding insult to injury which was always my snapping point, so grabbed him quick by the neck collar and shoulder sleeve then body slammed him to the ground where instantly on top of him proceeded to hammer his face and back of head with my fists into the filthy, cigarette and piss stained floor with four or five good, clean shots to his *fuckyou* mug before Horsehead and another *Phi Beta Kappa* clown that I can't remember exactly who, and doesn't matter anyway, rushed in to his rescue by pulling me off, which ol' Horse later actually apologized for, a rare event in my circles, but not before making my point leaving him dazed and a bit bloodied, staggered and unable to rise on his own before limping with the help of these two sudden Samaritans, out of the bathroom and out of the barroom never to be seen by me or probably even that barroom again. Case not closed though, only a measure of balance restored, *adjourned* until we meet again, when next time it's likely to be far worse. So, my PO didn't need to be *Elliott Ness* or *Sherlock Holmes* to put the twos and threes together and close an open burglary case, with my admission the evidence fell right into place, which he probably got points for. Second-rate *toughguy* Mickey Cleava, he was looking for an excuse or a good reason to come down hard on me anyhow, probably again at my parents' behest, maybe it was necessary as outa' control as I was or maybe they just wanted me gone but who knows? I handed him one. Tall, dark-eyed, Irish-faced, legendary Mickey Cleava, the PO with the big rep for handling the high-risk teenagers, juvenile delinquents. He came to his profession complete with the east New York accent when he was transferred to the suburbs, still young

enough to use it but old enough to make it sound strange in the suburbs, it was like he was reading an old movie script from another world, *Angels With Dirty Faces* or the *Bowery Boys*, a cross between the priest and Rocky Sullivan, he was the guy they assigned the *hard cases* to, they said. Though he probably started off his career aiming for the FBI or even grander professional ambitions, chasing down the elusive and truly dangerous, the thirty-something year old soon settled for a third tier, local law enforcement, county hack job, a petty probation officer manhandling way off-center, suburban brats like me. Pitiful. Maybe that was why he took his job so seriously, overcompensating again, not content with a carry permit, police powers and a tin shield he tried to make up for professional mediocrity by taking it out on his easy marks and captive case load, not that we deserved any sympathy but this guy stepped on my neck once, literally, hard, not all his weight but most of it, enough to pin me to the floor and in my own bedroom with me being all of about the size of a welter-weight horse jockey. So, when that early summer day came and he arrived with a warrant, police backup and handcuffs I soon found myself in a court room a year or so after the fact standing focused, frightened and silent not bragging or showing off merit badges in front of His Honor, the white-haired and black robed Judge Joseph Samenga of the Nassau County Criminal Court in Minneola, State of New York. It was yet another sentencing day for me that July 9th 1976, a sentencing day becoming routine except for each one growing more and more dire, not graduating or matriculating or vacationing like most of my peers and some of my friends that summer, preparing for freshman year away at college in the fall but a *sentencing*, my world now reduced to a crowded courtroom, steel handcuffs, Mickey Cleava and maybe soon jail. Fuck the bicentennial.

It was no real kinda' burglary in my criminal handbook anyway. I mean, yeah, we broke the backdoor window and let ourselves in, okay, I did, showed *Fucknut* how to get in, they were my next door neighbors who there was a beef with anyway, the parents that is. The father was a large, red-faced bully who grabbed neighborhood

kids pulling *ring and run* pranks and choked them, at least one I witnessed. He was a big, fearsome, red-faced, white-collared, Irish drunk and the mom? A nurse who once in an apoplectic fit of rage about our dog trespassing in their backyard or some such cardinal sin like that banged on our back door, (the same kind and placed as theirs that I smashed through the glass of) called my mom a "Jew-bitch," which my mother laughed at, but not me. Nope. Not funny. Not laughing. Anyway, their kids though? The two Catholic school girls around my age but a few years apart? Stacey and Kathy, they were alright, in fact one of them, the younger, Stacey was very alright, real cute, despite her braids and braces and for a while we sorta' made the rounds but that hardly mattered now, we needed to get high and stay high, that mattered, so there was work to do. Knowing which window to break to unlock the door and so doing to enter a premises not your own with out permission is by definition *braking and entering*, a *burglary* – so yeah, okay, got it, but we weren't pros or anything, not that it legally made a difference. We were just two drunk and stoned-out loser high-school kids on our way home from the classes we cut one cold, lonely, gray, winter afternoon while desperately searching for weed or pills or booze to swallow or jewelry or stereo equipment to steal and hock so we could get the cash to buy some weed and booze and pills to swallow and what the hell is so godawful terrible about that? I mean really? I understood it was *wrong* and on the books a crime, but really, a lot of stuff is technically *wrong* and gets by, real well, crime unpunished, let slide, even a sixteen year old could see that especially a heartbroken, sociopathic one. It wasn't like we were stealthy *cat burglars* or armed stickup men or something else even cooler, more dangerous or profitable, whatever the hell *cat burglars* actually are, stealing sacred jewels or military secrets, we were just young, stupid and disturbed kids looking to get high and willing to take risks to do so, so the title *burglars* seemed a bit of a stretch in my opinion. The guys who broke into the Watergate, they were burglars, Bilbo Baggins was a burglar, Willie Sutton was a burglar. Get it? Not exactly us, more like impulsive punks that didn't give a fuck. But even impulsive punks have their day in court when they

get caught, and even punks who don't give a fuck have to pay for their sins sooner or later it seemed, which was what His Honor the judge was about to arrange.

At some point prior, the legendary Sue Andrews took my case and conducted an interview, screening, and investigation, a pre-sentencing evaluation intended to provide a judge with the guidance a simple rap sheet and police report cannot. They wanna know what to do with you and she tells them, that basically sums it up. Sue was a tiny, brown-eyed and very intense little lady, pretty sweet looking too for an older gal – hada' be in her late thirties, a big shot who the county dubbed some sort of official *drug abusing disturbed teenagers* maven and though she was tiny and pretty, I don't know what ever qualified her and never found out but this middle-class, suburban mother of four and wife of one was a very serious sister who exuded *a Joan of Arc* type of zealotry. Apparently she was on some type a crusade and carried weight beyond her mass so when the court settled the case – a guilty plea to an E felony, *Burglary* in the 3rd and a conviction for the DA's collection, *Youthful Offender* in exchange for five years probation – concurrent with the three already serving for the stained-glass, leaded windows attack, the first of the five a mandated term of one year in an inpatient, fulltime, county run treatment facility, beginning today, this morning, now. She was right there, front and center, as it was undoubtedly her *behind-the-scenes* writ he was following. There would be no jail time in exchange for a guilty plea, but I wouldn't be going home that day either and not for the next three hundred and sixty-four. While being speedily cuffed and ushered away from the bench by *toughguy* Mickey Cleava and the *dumb-as-clay* court officers and with great sudden purpose Sue rushed towards me. Through the crowded morning courtroom filled with attorneys, spectators, defendants, witnesses, victims, litigants, officers and clerks, for a brief moment she interfered with the flow of action when with the hushed tone of an urgent whisper looked deeply into my eyes, from close enough to kiss and said: "*I know you think this is all quite unnecessary right now, but believe me it is.*" Though she was

definitely right on the first score and probably right on the second though I had my doubts, profound ones. Miserable as I was I still didn't want to be sent away anywhere. Who can ever know what may have happened if events had unfolded only slightly differently – another play, like, say I walked, more probation, community service, whatever, just a slight side step off another path any time before – forever backward 'til the dawn of time by anything or anyone, ever, might lead everyone and everything to very different destinations, the old *butterfly effect*. Meanwhile, the *Sticks* were long gone, divvied up, and smoked in celebration that night. Emboldened by the success of that first dramatic and well-executed score it's likely I'd have tried it again and sooner or later targeted the wrong drug tycoon with yours truly ending up badly broken beyond repair or just plain dead. On the other hand why so negative? Perhaps maybe ended up the *Thai Stick* kingpin of the south shore! Butterflies and destinies, who knows? Right? Not me. Back to *Sun Tzu* and knowing or not knowing, I knew me, I knew the terrain but didn't really know them. Not so good. The Burnstein crew did come after me and paid a quick visit to my house a few days later. Fortunately, again, alerted by the unexpected knock, then looking before opening the front door, I retreated out the back door, cutting through yards to get away, but it was now clear they weren't about to let it go. I was marked. How they found my address spooked me a bit, but there were bigger concerns just then. At least hunter-turned-prey was nearly unavailable and soon to be completely, and remain so for probably the next full calendar year, a minor consolation as sentencing was about to land me at a psycho-speak, post-psychedelic, post hippie, post Watergate and Vietnam trauma drug abuse rehabilitation center, a T.C., short for therapeutic community, called Topic House, the acronym standing for *treatment of people in crisis.*

Located somewhere in the ass-end of Mitchell Field*,* itself situated in a character-deprived suburban, nothin' to nowhere town called Uniondale, yeah, same as the teenage movie theater hangout, it was setup in a fenced in trailer park where that year was going to be

spent. I never saw Mighty Madam Andrews or her pretty eyes again, we left it at the courtroom as it was Cleava and his nameless, shorter, broader, lighter and probably tougher work partner and two dumb-as-fuck court officers, one as driver and the other as uniformed henchman that escorted me by county van, still handcuffed from that woebegone courthouse to my new home away from home. Figuring that since all four were armed and licensed and in all likelihood wouldn't hesitate to use force if anyone was reckless enough or stupid enough or just plain so desperate as to give them cause, even *half-a-cause* like *run,* which occurred to me, but didn't. No chance, anyway. Thus, evaluating my options it was painfully obvious that there were but two, a) something suicidally stupid or b) just sit there and let events unfold, so settled myself in for that last, quick drive in open free air. At least we weren't heading to the *monkey house* for another round there, as at not even eighteen yet, still almost a full summer away, still a minor, Topic House was the last stop before that dreaded abyss, so there was that too. At least it wasn't *gladiator school.*

All in.

"The property," as the participants referred to the grounds, except for one side bordered by the towering wreckage of the infamous "old house," was enclosed by an eight-foot high cyclone fence, surrounding almost the entirety of the five or six blacktopped acres allotted it, a rectangular space containing a total of seventeen full, fixed, standing trailers orbiting a single large *main house*, or *the floor*, itself composed by four of them combined, forming another rectangle, four deep – the interior walls removed, creating one large, standalone, fixed unit, housing a fully equipped kitchen, several long aluminum folding dining tables and chairs, a small corner book and music library with a stereo, speakers and an old, donated upright piano and a relatively spacious lounging area complete with thrift shop sofas, arm chairs, card tables, a classroom sized rolling blackboard on wheels, and a toilet by the rear. At the two opposing

corner entrances to the property, suspended across gaps in the fencing just wide enough to allow for vehicular traffic to flow one way in or out, were detachable, twelve-foot chain-link barriers that functioned as access control gates. Each gate had its own small wooden shack, just large enough for a single guardian, where the regularly rotated sentries, a family member with strength armed with a pen and a logbook and a huge glass jug of hot coffee or tea – enough to start an eight hour shift - sat and watched, greeted, recorded or denied entry and reported. There were no uninvited guests. That's where we were met by the sentry and a longhaired young man of maybe twenty-one or two with a goatee in a cool looking bleached just-right denim jacket, obviously a family member who could have passed for the lead singer of The Eagles, performers of the mega hit Hotel California, arguably the worst song of its era. Since we were expected, he seemed confident and relaxed, greeting the POs and small entourage of correction officers who had driven the two-bit burglar and expensive window-smasher there from the courtroom in the unmarked county van. Before leaving me, they exchanged some papers and pleasant small talk, after which Al Ca*FUCKEN*pone was uncuffed and released to the charge of Donny Brink, the young man with the casual confidence and hip facial hair, who then, after checking in with the sentry and getting everything logged in, shook my hand, introduced himself, and escorted me to the main six-trailer structure, the aforementioned *house floor*. Bye-bye PO Cleava and co., bye-bye Captain Putz! Until we meet again, which I hope is *never.*

The Chair

The Prospect Chair is a sturdy, armless, straight-backed, brushed aluminum sitting device normally known simply as a chair, but this one was special – not electric or for getting your haircut or teeth drilled, not even a royal throne, but nonetheless sacred – not merely furniture or any physical thing, it was like a metaphysical portal – the channel through which a prospect passes from one world to the

next – the first being the world outside "the family" or "house" and the second being the world within. And there are only these two. Classic cult. No one can properly pass through either way without first paying reflective homage to the occasion by an indeterminate session on the Prospect Chair. Having no idea where we actually were aside the first quick visual impressions, just arriving without even the slightest briefing as what to expect, except by Mighty Mini-Mouse's urgent whisper, I followed direction hoping for the strength to manage and adjust to wherever, whatever it was that now basically owned me. Once inside the main house my denim jacketed escort pointed to the nearest Chair available – one of several stationed inches from the same a wall – in formal position facing it. Posted to the wall right in front of each at eye level was a sheet of white, unlined legal size paper printed upon which was the text of the House's *hhhmmm…* how shall I say? The mission statement, or credo or as they called it *prayer.* Yes, that's right, it was called "the Prospect's Prayer." Like the common cults we're familiar with calling themselves a family, from the Mansons to the Mormons, there was a religious component. If there had been any doubts about Topic House's true nature in anyone casually observing, a county sponsored therapeutic community like Odyssey, Samaritan and Phoenix Houses before them, there it was, *behold!* Good old-fashioned, old-time revivalist religion without the *god* part explicit – so even then, right from the start, for sure I'd never buy in. Ever. Forget it. I already had one of those and one was quite enough, *thank you*, which suited me about as much as I could bear of it just fine, too many *thou shalls* and *thou shalt nots*, and I'm bound to it, tight, practicing or not, so pass the *kiddush cup* and make it a double, please. *L'chayim y'all.*

Now, the next thing to know about sitting on *the chair* is that you can only be placed on it by a staff member, no other residents, guests, or visitors, not even the Chief Expeditor, though you can place yourself on it, in either case, it is a very serious and solemn event rich in existential symbolism. Excluding the rare occasion when you might self place, an event akin to contemplating suicide as

some had gone through with, not *fearing the reaper* – or murder, same – or just *splitting*, again, you cannot be placed or ordered onto *the chair* except by staff, never by a merely mortal family member no matter how high their official rank or level of personal status – except for like now, the one occasion: in the event that you are just arriving and seeking *entry* or *admission* to the *family* in which case the assigned escort, a seasoned (fully indoctrinated) member of sufficient family status directs and witnesses your placement. In that case it's simply *proforma* ritual – no decision involved, it's preauthorized by protocol – anyway, that said I was directed to and placed on *the chair* by Don. The seating procedure itself is a formal ritual. One, they patiently instructed does not simply grab the chair and drag or slide it away from its set position close to and facing the wall then seat oneself before pushing oneself on the chair back forward, that would be much too casual for a sacrament this significant, rather *one first stands reverently, squarely behind the chair, grasps the back at the tops of both sides, one in each hand, lift and carry it a step or two a few inches back to a second position, set it back down, all four legs at once – release then step forward in front of it, lifting it again to bring it back to the first position, then once properly replaced turn around one-eighty to face the wall and then be seated – inches from it.* This was demonstrated exactly once which they expected you to remember, the function and the ritual along with its meaning, a period of contemplative meditation on one's very existence, always and forever, *the chair* and the routine and that I have.

While seated on *the chair* one is in an off limits zone to *the house* members, no family member other than an *Expeditor* (status position as in *a low level officer, a cop/rat*) or above or a staff member can communicate with you – you are otherwise invisible – the only thoughts one is supposed to entertain involve the document posted on the wall in front of you as a sort of background score or epilogue/prologue to the movie version of your life playing in the screening room behind your eyeballs, detailing the plot of the narrative summed up by the epic title *My Fucked-up Life*, *How I Got*

Here, this place of coerced conformity, guided introspection and incarceration. One never knows for how long, for what term they will be pinned to *the chair*, can be minutes, can be hours, can be days. If the event that causes one to be placed on it is serious enough, say for example the breaking of one of three *Cardinal Rules* or a returning *splitee* seeking readmission – more about them both later, they may be compelled to spend days at a time on *the chair* – being allowed to get off *the chair* at 11 PM only to have to sleep along side it on a thin sheet on the cool, hard, linoleum tile floor, then be awakened at seven to be seated back on. Food, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and coffee or milk are served three times a day, peanut butter, and jelly sandwiches three times a day perhaps for several. You won't starve. Toilet trips are arranged by requests made to an Expeditor who first gets permission from a higher up, the Shingle or Chief, possibly staff then after repeating the ritual in reverse, rising from the chair, maintaining silence escorts you, waits outside and then back on it again, aside that there is no time-off or break from *the chair*. Luckily for me, as is the case with most *Noodleheads* seeking entry to *the house* for the first time, the pre-initial intake term on *the chair* is mercifully brief – probably no more than an hour or two – an occasion for focused and forced contemplation – but not without the first requisite taste of shameful public humiliation. Sitting on chairs facing walls is for children, a child's punishment, not the way an adult is respectfully treated, not even a teenager, no dignity, forget it, that's stripped the moment one allows themselves to be placed on *the chair,* you are signaling submission, the beginning stages in conformance with the crushing of the ego and the will. In TC world there is none of the adult status ordinarily granted and assumed on the outside, in early treatment you're automatically dubbed a *Noodlehead* meaning a head full of mush without *strength* who can never even be trusted to be left alone, not for a minute, always needing the accompaniment and supervision of an assigned minder – a *big brother* or *big sister* who is constantly *aware* and so attached to the *Noodlehead* for that period and responsible for not only showing you around and initiating the indoctrination, but also responsible for knowing your

whereabouts and doings 24/7 for the first thirty day indoctrination period, a two-way burden and intrusion. “Strength,” as they called the chief quality of a resident with acceptable status, no longer a *Noodlehead,* is acquired after successfully completing the thirty-day transition period proving one’s sincere desire to *join the family* by demonstrating obedience and effort. Conform or be *dealt with* and if not? Gone, no discussion, no negotiation, no middle ground, total *Orwell.* Everyone had a serious reason for being there, usually but not always court, and for me, well, as we know mine was the court order meaning that if I failed to comply, *split* early or was kicked out? Well, that’s what they build prisons for and they got plenty of’m. Samenga promised that if I violated the terms of the probation this time, again, while already on probation for the window busting caper, the terms of this plea bargain would be forfeited and I’d be re-sentenced on the original burglary charge, a felony on my adult record meaning *bye-bye birdie,* it’s back to the *big house* and it wouldn’t be *county* either, it would be state *gladiator academy* time which hada’ be worse than Topic House, much worse, that was absolutely certain, so swallowed my ego, took my seat and decided to wait it out, the year, interminable for a wild kid like me at still only seventeen, so would just have to handle it the best I could, however that might turn out, there was no other clear way out, got it, I’m all in, but fuck the rest of it and fuck the prayer, I’ll just sit, and ponder, quietly, just like *Psycho*.

Welcome to a world of self-pity, this was the summer that should’ve been a celebration of graduating high school. *Ha!* I couldn’t even make it through *Greenhouse*, while most of my peers and neighbors and friends were off to the big wide world – excited about being accepted into distant colleges, leaving home to far off cities – maybe joining the military – the draft ended a year or two before so it was a reasonably sane choice or maybe getting some cool summer job like lifeguard or bartender in a hip club, something else – anything else, they were free, getting on with life as grownups – breaking from childhood. School was out again and here I am, sitting on a cold, hard, metal so-called Prospect Chair facing a wall – as life in and

out of the House was lived around me… holding back tears… feeling invisible, but they weren't – the residents, sensing them as they occasionally sauntered past the new guy, hiding quick, slick, side glances, checking me out, the next Prospect, me playing the stuffed, dead mother in *Psycho* too gentle to even swat a fly. The *family* was composed of guys and girls, black and white and a few Latino, young and old and in between: hippies, derelicts – hard looking tattooed convicts, half retarded-mental-patient looking dudes smoking *Tops*, housing project dykes, snot-nosed, suburban brats, pathetic, quivering old men, everyone busy, some wearing the long, odd looking cardboard signs covered with magic-marker messages I couldn't make out in front of them draped from their necks by thick straps of cloth, others smoking store bought cigarettes and drinking plastic mugs of coffee, music from a stereo in the corner – *WBLS* again – the number one disco-soul station I never liked, much too *establishment* and celebratory, happy dance music, fuck dance music. Give me rock'n roll, mostly 60s, Cream, Hendrix and the Doors but they weren't playing them instead cheap disco as backdrop to the muffled sounds of people speaking, laughing, arguing, life – still, it didn't seem too threatening – no one looked like they were suffering, no fear, no wailing or crying, no thumping or the hollow thud of pounding flesh echoing through the tier, definitely better than jail but definitely not better than the streets free to rip-off drug dealers and take my chances or cruise around town or heading to the beach with my *Droogs* yet there I sat my first hour on a chair – facing a wall and having to read a stupid, propaganda poem like a psalm about "…*neither the dwarves of our fears nor the giants of our dreams*…" blah, blah, blah and closing with "*credit one who has proven,*" whatever the fuck that was supposed to mean. Prove what? To who? From that very first moment I began quietly counting out the days and weeks and months of a year, one calendar year starting today, starting right now: day one, hour one. Man, this really sucked and like couldn't be ignored kept reminding myself, it was summer, the freest time of the year and here I am, so very, very unfree pinned to a fucking metal chair staring at a wall.

"Someone's knockin' on the door – somebody's ringin' the bell..."
(Paul McCartney)

Early that evening, just after supper and the mercifully short term seated in agonized contemplation and no small dose of shame, maybe four or five hours, two Expeditors along with Donnyboy came over with the solemnly delivered instructions to *get up off the Chair,* grasp and carry it according to the manner described and follow them with it to a compact staff room in another trailer to be *interviewed.* It was a short walk across the blacktop plaza separating the main *house* from the surrounding satellite trailers designated for sleeping quarters, therapy sessions, and workshops. Climbing the two or three steps at the nearest trailer, behind Don, Expeditors behind me, they guided me to the destination at the end of a dimly lit, narrow hallway. Upon arriving just outside its closed door the two Expeditors exited the quiet corridor leaving Don and me to stand and wait, me still behind him holding the chair, him at practically military attention just in front of the closed door. It was maybe a long, minute or two dramatically enhanced pause before he knocked twice and announced himself, much too loudly for such a small space but nonetheless deliberate – by name and title in very formal, short scripted phrases and had "prospect Robert Kabakoff seeking admission" with him, quickly followed by a booming, solo male voice responding from inside with the same forceful command style bark: "*enter!*" It all seemed very contrived and overly performed, so much drama packed almost amusingly into such little action, but for me? Inescapable. Forced by order of Samenga to play along with these petty procedures and ridiculous rituals, and precisely as mighty maven Sue Andrews whispered to Kid Kabbo the frustrated felon earlier that morning in the crowded courtroom, *quite unnecessary.*

Entering the dimly lit room with a single, small, shut window with shade drawn, cheap paneling, a thrift shop sofa, table lamps and throw away arm chairs seated in front of me were about six or seven people, mostly residents, center among them as was later disclosed

the grand resident Pooh-Bah the Chief Expeditor holding the top job position, his the booming voice along with several other rank and file residents with *strength*, male and female, buttressed by a single, mostly silent but all powerful staff member. No one introduced themselves, no one smiled, no one greeted me, rather it was the TC style welcoming committee that instructed me to place the Chair down, facing them from a very few steps away and take a seat, *all four legs at once* they reminded. Very important. Next, one at a time taking turns addressing me, or more precisely dressing me down, this kangaroo committee of bought-in players performed another entry ritual whose specific title aside *interview* escapes me, maybe *intake*, but whichever, no stinkin' rose by any other name, the event remains vivid enough in rough detail to have left its ugly impression. Each of the comfortably seated participants had a go at me, challenging me as to just *who in the righteous fuck* I imagined myself to be, *what the fuck* was going on in my life that brought me to be there and why should they care enough about me or it or anything else regarding my fucked up world for that matter to let me in, i.e., and *join the family*. Of course these probes were rhetorical, this was not to be a discussion, they weren't looking for answers, the interviewee was not allowed to speak, so it's not really an *interview* – it's a full frontal battering intended to smash, or at least crack the wall of ego – put you down – shatter your *front* as they called it, *your personality,* people leave in tears – mostly chicks who are usually but not always easier to rattle – forcing one to either shut down, rebel or open up to a vulnerability of dubious value – your life is now in *Fucked-up Land*, no denying that, and you are the one that brought it there, no one else, in either case you are on the defensive. The inquisitors, who have been briefed on you and your case guess at where and how to strike – psychological warfare, *was a twerp like me trying compensate?* and often they're right – it was easy to see the kid seated in front of them was a make-believe tough guy who thought he was smarter than everyone else on a suicide/revenge mission so they got that right – but other times the jabs miss the target entirely, *you too smart to keep out of trouble?* Then it all seems so pointlessly gratuitous and contrived, a scripted

scene, no matter, you just have to sit there and take it, *or?* Go to prison. Basically, their act was backed up by the courts, the judge and his uniformed henchmen so they enthusiastically let you know in no uncertain terms that no one was impressed by you, your stunts, your *front* or anything else about who they're looking at but if you want to join this *family* and maybe get your life back and straightened out, where the well established and rigid pecking order has you pretty close to the bottom, you'll have to accept a thirty day trial period when you can demonstrate your seriousness and commitment – the *Noodlehead* stage – and, unsaid but growing increasingly clear to me like a lot of other ironic but necessary evils in this world of the thousand shocks mortal flesh is heir to, the only dependable way out of this mess was from inside it. *Great. Just fuck'n great.* A year of this crap, a year with no buzz, no getting high, no fist-fighting or fornicating. *Want to?* Was that actually in the script? Of course I didn't *want* to – I *had* to – had to, no choice – not really, no good one at least: stay there and put up with this shit as best I could or surrender to jail by withdrawing my plea which was most definitely out of the question. The only third way was likely just as bad and would also likely lead to jail on a much heavier beef sooner rather than later, or lastly and least likely forever on the run, and that would be to just "*split*" as they called it, unauthorized leave, just walk out. Fuck you Mr. Expeditor. You too Mr. Chief. Goodbye. People did it more often that not. Just go. Really fucking great 'cause with no money, no family and hardly any friends – at least none that could help me, where the hell was I gonna go and live happily and safely ever after, or even just have a little fun as a fugitive on the run before the Samenga minions ran me down and brought me in? *Itchykoo Park? MacArthur's? Yasgur's farm? Maggie's?* Where? The state of things was truly grim and growing ever grimmer by the hour. So, after the initial chair-sitting-brainwashing exercise and the attempted half hour psychological battering phase of the hazing, at least there was no paddle, I was lead out of the trailer door, not in tears but holding on steady despite the relentless pain in my gut – trapped, easier to keep somewhat centered when you're really angry – accompanied by Don the

veteran now assigned officially as my *big brother* responsible for monitoring me round the clock during my *Noodlehead* term as every prospect is similarly paired off with *strength*. Together we walked back to *the floor* where as directed placed the Prospect Chair down exactly where I found it, handling it exactly as instructed earlier without having to be reminded, having now officially joined *the family* and the indoctrination process begun. After today? Only a mere three hundred and sixty four more to go, *Zeus help us.*

Don wasn't really that bad a guy, he could see how much pain I was in behind my stoic mask and I didn't mind him knowing. Who wouldn't be? After returning with *the chair* back to the main-house, *the floor,* he introduced me around, looked to be like a eighty or ninety or so people, maybe less, most seemed decent, and welcoming, reasonably content, a real cross section of Nassau Country by age, sex, race, class, cool looking dudes beating a jail rap, a few young foxy ladies too, so all was not totally lost. Exiting the floor he walks me around the Property for a more detailed survey of my new environment, showing me the inside of the trailer I'd be assigned to for sleep, same one as his, same room too. Immaculate. Military barracks clean, orderly. No artwork or decoration. Beds made, hospital corners, clothes folded, hangers facing the same way, evenly spaced. *Nutso.* Each trailer had three bedrooms and one bathroom, two or three or four guys to each bunk-bed furnished room, females of course had their own – "separate but equal" – taken together, much more livable than *ten cell.* He was an easy going, mellow fellow kinda' dude, half a make-believe hippie, half a jean jacket wearin' fake Long Island cowboy, hard to imagine what he might have done to get himself there, the kinda' guy I would have bought an ounce from or sold one to, but not the kind I'd ever smash windows with or expect to have my back in a street fight, or even really talk seriously with. Some, few, actually volunteered, lost souls looking for direction and companionship maybe, it was never really clear. But not Don Brink, he wasn't that much of a pussy, I don't think, just a go-along to get-along capitulator, an old world Dutch-American stock guy, my guess was

that for whatever reason brought him there he'd been thoroughly indoctrinated, or at least he played shrewdly like that. Also never clear. Close to B-Stage he said, pleased with himself, a destination I had no intention of ever reaching, not even interested in pretending, not even lip-service. My big brother was converted, okay, good for him but I'm not joining him no-how, I kept assuring myself, not even the charade, not with nobody here so made up my mind to keep a friendly, polite distance and never open up, just humor him and my strange surroundings as best as possible while figuring out more about Topic Houses and what I'd have to contend with here, settling for just how to manage the next two or three hours before lights out, let alone year. End of day one.

Next day after the first cafeteria-style breakfast with *the family*, decent grub and all the coffee you can drink, much better than the cold, fake scrambled eggs of the *monkey house* the new duo took another stroll around *the property.* We tour the trailers used as work shops where residents were assigned their daily labor: a mechanic shop for repairs, a shop for the mini- vegetable farm run by a former 1%er biker on staff, a black bearded, bandana wearing heavy dude named Tony, of course, who still looked very much the part but could use three syllable words and speak in complete English sentences, a tailor shop with a washing machine, dryer and donated old clothes where I'd pick out mine, mostly funky hippie hand-me-downs and rags, the fully equipped kitchen large enough to serve three squares to a hundred hungry mouths seven days a week, the commissary, the business office where hand-written records of e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g were copied, maintained and stored, and where resident higher-ups frequently held court and issued *haircuts*. Next, the introductions to the current coterie of family members, mostly seasoned veterans deeply immersed, true-believers or so they appeared, adapted, working their ways out and through, many older than I by about a decade giving me firm handshakes and assuring nods, cool, while other folks seemed vacantly *out-to-lunch,* drooling, smoking the poorly rolled state cigarettes held between dirty, long fingernails stained brown yellow – talking to themselves

– head-cases dumped there by the county, a few other guys, parolees looking at me hard – tattooed with the hooded reaper, *FTW* and spider-webs on their elbows – if it were prison there'd be issues. Clearly, all those rules and rituals had a point as *big brother Don* explained – keep the passions and attitudes in check, two examples: no throwing cigarette butts on the ground, put them out and in your pocket, discard later, no leaning on the walls, which they considered *skid values* – (on the skids, i.e., "*skid row*") respect the grounds, it's not a garbage dump, stand on your own two feet – act like a man, autonomously, speaking of which and worth mentioning again there were a few young and very attractive females on the scene, "sisters," he advised, thoughts of Sherry now slipping mercifully somewhat to the background. That really helps, girls, females, ladies, pretty eyes, soft skin, flowing hair, coy smiles, gentle voices, tits and ass everywhere, he doesn't introduce me but they see me and I see them. Contact. As explained in the *welcoming session* the night before, among countless other rules and practices and lingo and half-baked psychobabble bullshit they listed while bombarding me with insults and challenges there were these three very strictly enforced prohibitions they called "*cardinal rules*" which hada' be very serious with a title like that and made known right away – no point waiting 'til braking one *more-or-less* unknowingly to discover. *Cardinal* meant there were very serious consequences for breaking them and so, in no particular order: no *sex*, no *drugs* and no *violence*. Yeah. *Hmmm.* Interesting. What else is new? Thank the gods we still had the titans of rock'n roll, what there was left of it after Woodstock buried it. But what the fuck's left for excitement while you're growing old waiting to die? They were basically all I ever did or thought about for the last five or so years, definitely since my bar-mitzvah anyway, them, beer, broads and brawls, they were all there was worth anything in life, all that was cool and fun at least, much of the rest being stultifying varieties of *morning regularity* dressed up as *achievements* and *success*, so what was the kid supposed to do without all them for the next year? Copy logbooks to terrible radio songs while the clock ticked; pretend to be impressed? Let life pass me by at not even eighteen? Bleak. Bleak.

Bleak and more bleak. Trapped. Holding back tears – choking, eyes glassy, inhale, exhale, I just got here; try to make it to the next meal then leave, split. That's all. Leave. Just walk out. Don't cry. Don't break down, act like a fuck'n man. Try. Try hard. Breathe. Oh shit. Shit. Shit again. *Fuck'n shit. I'm stuck.*

The Floor

"The floor" as they called it, or *main house*, was the focus of group activity, all the big, formal action where the family conducted the regular routine functions: ate their meals, held daily morning and evening meetings when timely house business was conducted and communicated along with celebratory events like the occasional holiday party or family dance took place. They were wild though, those dances, so much of the inevitable, pent up frustrations were let out on that occasionally converted dance floor, and there were usually enough decent musicians in *the family* to make for pretty decent house bands, and on those occasions? We all really rocked, almost everybody, even some of the jittery Tops smokers. On one of those memorable occasions, even Kabbo got into the act, on short notice, practicing then performing just the simple, right-hand melody of *The Shadow of Your Smile* on the piano, eliciting some unexpectedly intense applause as a consequence of my timing and touch. So, it wasn't all purgatory, just most of it. On the other extreme you had the irregular, sudden surprise of the highly melodramatic code red event called the *GM* or *general meeting.* That's when pressing family business of the utmost urgency was brought to collective attention, e.g., if someone of enhanced status or otherwise high profile "split" or was about to be "shot down" or staff had something they considered important enough to jointly announce, a new policy or major impact event coming up, a county inspection or special family function, policy change, whatever, only big stuff, theatrical melodrama. When a GM was announced the word was spread by Expeditors carrying log books making routine, hourly surveillance rounds, family members in the roles of beat

cops, communicators and snitches. Word of a GM was spoken in the hushed tone of an urgent command. Once received the follow up procedure was to drop everything, cease all work in every shop except guard duty and immediately walk silently to *the floor*, no talking, nothing, take a seat while maintaining silence, (no "*buttocks*... ") and wait for the staff to enter stage, which could be a matter of minutes or hours, either way, high drama, featuring them as Peppermint Paddy cool types, sandals and sunglasses, late twenties to mid thirties, either veterans of the House or MSW candidates, sometimes both, but in any case pretty sharp cats and under Jim Jones? The law. Backed up the same way. One of them, yet another fiery redheaded, untamed shrew, Joan Hoffman was a standout, her looks and her words. She could and would rip the toughest of us to shreds, yeah, dope fiends, drug dealers, and street whores, if she felt it therapeutically necessary, seeing right through your *image* or *front* into your core, the weaknesses that distorted your character that you tried to cover up in a variety of ways, many of them the *crisis*-provoking ones. Even I, Mr. Don't Give-a-Fuck, treaded lightly. If you heard her call your name it usually wasn't good, so brace yourself. *"Hey! Look at Mr. Scary Muscles with all those terrifying tattoos! Is that a dragon? AND a tiger too? Wow.. Frightening... Very manly. Sent into a fit of hysterics because he doesn't like the way the twerpy expeditor pulled him up! Why the tender temperament under all those scary muscles and tattoos? Is that what they're supposed to be hiding?"* Or *"awwww… let's all cry for the sweet little Ho' Peep who lost her sheep, the too stoned for cheerleading drop-out looking for the daddy she never found to tell her 'no'. Okay everyone on three, one, two, three let's be* ***sad****."* The idea was to strip you of pretense then build your character from base. That said, she called mine once, or we were already chatting when she told me: "you're very hung up on your height. Short. A short man. That's how you see yourself. What you don't realize is that the moment you open your mouth people don't see you like that anymore. They see you." Huh? Okay. But it stuck. And at a GM? Lotso' *schadenfreude,* someone was usually in big trouble and hopefully it was a big shot, as was often the case. For example, after

an extended wait, maybe an hour and a half or more of silent anticipation it was curtain call, the entire staff; about ten members, among them the merciless B-Stagers, often reformed street junkies and hookers turned counselors themselves, would finally enter the *house floor,* filing in with the former Chief Expeditor in tow. The grand entrance spectacle was followed by the performative dressing down, a reading of the riot act, a list of weighty transgressions in front of the entire gathered *family,* often including the added impact of a visual, *an object lesson* in *housespeak,* say, wearing a thick cardboard signed draped from his neck to his knees spelling out in black magic marker the nature of his sins ("I steal from commissary - confront me") or maybe the brandishing of his freshly shaved head or in the case of females the wearing of a hideous looking stocking cap over their hair and head. Once Jim Jones made me wear a red Christmas tree bulb dangling from my ear strung by a thread, my infraction? Wearing a homemade earring of broom straw and melted plastic through my ear to keep the hole from closing that after a few hours gets remarkably painful. Try it. Whichever, it was always quite theatrical, a big shame fest for *the family* to enjoy, *live from Mitchell Field!*

Once a week, every Friday afternoon after lunch *the floor* hosted a raucous and confrontational, no (verbal) holds barred (just remain seated), ninety-minute psychodrama session called *family group* attended by everyone, staff and residents alike all on theoretical equal footing, when all *bans* "total" or otherwise were lifted and more of the pent up energy of treatment duress was released. The regular event was a full on mass therapy exercise moderated by the enigmatic, middle-aged, head-honcho of the joint, a slight and unassuming chap almost deified by staff and residents alike, a red-haired, owlish looking odd fellow by the name of Jim Jones, Dr. James Taylor Jones to be exact but *Jim Jones* to us. Yeah, ironically enough the same name as the evil bastard, cult-leader of Jamestown mass suicide notoriety but not theirs. Our Jim Jones was the serious, straight-laced fellow who wore a bushy red mustache and thick, black eyeglass frames with thicker lenses over his small, tightly

focused, piercing-brown eyes, and belonged to the county. Picture *Wally Cox* with a spine of steel. Aside the weekly *family group* and the occasional meals when he joined us the facility director was seldom seen. Jim Jones had his own trailer/office/bedroom where he'd meet with county officials, fellow professionals, B-Stagers and sometimes even the local press. *Odd* in the surprising way he was able to handle himself so adroitly in confrontational encounters with some potentially dangerous heavies, young and old, male or female, stickup men, junkies, street hookers, jail-birds and assorted loosely packed nutcases, thus the earned respect. Even as all hell might break out at *family group*, racial, sexual, authority issues, whatever, heat, he'd quietly *wow* you with his insight, seeming to know exactly who you were and what really made you tick, or needed, or both without even going to the time and trouble of personally figuring you out, and probably better than you knew yourself, like when raging at a staff member he might interject "which one of your parents would you really most like to say that to? We're listening," or "why is it so hard to tell us how you feel without attacking your friends? What stops you? How does hurting them make it seem easier?" and you'd quiet down, not in the least further antagonized, instead might be contemplating a thoughtful reply. To staff you were mostly your image, your *front* as they called it, a poorly scripted character you cast yourself as but couldn't really make work, only maybe convincing yourself, that's why you ended up here, your failed pathetic act. To him? You were obvious, and he was mostly dead on the mark right. In lieu of traumatized hostages and cult adherents waiting to be beamed up from the jungles of Guyana our guy held a PhD in clinical psychology and despite his position of real authority, legal and professional never seemed at all power mad in a way that we could sense while at the same time quietly, fully and indisputably in charge. His word, softly as he spoke it was law. Though he never threatened you knew one call from him and they'd be there with the cuffs within minutes and you'd be on your way to a much, much worse place real quick, forever added to the dreaded NTR list, *never to return*.

On Thursday nights, after evening free time and before clearing for lights out, we attended the mandatory weekly *I Want It* session when official responses to formal requests for the restoration of *immediately removed upon arrival* privileges might be granted. The verdict had already been decided at a closed meeting of the six or seven Department Heads earlier that day, then at that late night gathering the decisions were read out and publicly announced, name by name, privilege by privilege called an *I Want It.* The ascending order of these lost/surrendered privileges, the so-called *I Want Its* were put in for through the department head of the shop they were currently assigned to the week before, then notification of the granting or denying by the 2PM was announced at the Thursday night meeting the following week. A rigid yet thoughtfully designed schedule of incremental advancements was roughly organized according to time spent in treatment with "*strength,*" meaning in good standing for at least thirty consecutive and ongoing days, serving as the program's structural format marking progress. The decision announcements were read out by staff, usually followed by vigorous applause for a positive "*yes,*" or for the more frequent "*ask again*"s or flat out "*no*"s, no applause, instead an explanation, a "you're still acting-out" or "cop to your guilt" sort of comment, meaning the petitioner didn't move any closer to B-Stage that week. The high-status residents, *Department Heads,* and a pair of rotated staff members called *the 2PM* (named for the hour they routinely met) met to evaluate the requesting family member's performance in general but focused more intently on the current week's, basing their decisions on that collective observation and judgment. For instance, aside the first privilege, *walking alone*, i.e., without a minder, a *big brother* or *sister* or anyone with strength, which was automatically returned after successfully completing the initial mandatory thirty days of Noodlehead status subjugation, could be the *jewelry privilege* (confiscated and held at arrival) or *visitors, letter writing,* or *phone calls*, or later still, *night out* privileges leading up to *weekends out* and ultimately the tenth or eleventh or twelfth (?) grand finale *B-Stage* privilege – the graduation I Want It. This process, if followed in a straight uninterrupted line without the

(often deliberately planned) setbacks such as shoot-downs (getting fired from a status job) or splitting and/or a Contract or just a lot of "nos" and "ask agains" was ideally designed to take about eighteen months, but that schedule seldom if ever was kept. The road was more often complicated and bumpy interrupted by one or the other or all three, sometimes again and again and even more frequently people would just drop out entirely, *split* (their official term for AWOL) and never return, probably only a 1-2% or possibly fewer retention to completion rate, or it might take two to three years if the resident was determined enough and hung in there despite the setbacks and or had no other place to go so quietly, maybe even subconsciously planned it that way, sticking around where all life's critical needs were met by sucking the county's reliable, fat teat. New residents arrived while others *split* almost every day so achieving *B-Stage* was as big a deal as it was rare. I didn't care about any of that either though, as per my usual, having already decided before even arriving on splitting permanently at the end of the mandated term, *I Want It* or not, not even a question in my world. You know what you could do with your *I Want Its* was my attitude; I didn't *I Want It* shit and never even bothered asking for any, there was nobody I cared to write to or call or visit with anyway. Fuck jewelry. None of it. Word was they expected by then, the sentence's expiration, I'd change my mind, be drawn into the cult and stay until completion by their measure, finishing the program to *B-Stage*. Okay. Right. Sure, whatever you say, but not at all likely, so don't bet on it. At not even eighteen, I badly wanted to be free, and if not free now, then free again when the clock ran out, that was a virtual certainty, and holding on to believing that was in no small way how I got through.

On a lighter note, the floor was where we socialized, tried to relax, watch TV, enjoy music, maybe read, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, played cards or chess, and checked out the ladies, the forbidden act they called "felonious eye-balling," these were our *sisters*, dogma insisted (riiight...) and if witnessed by a house-rat (practically everybody, yes, ratting was mandatory and essential to

their Orwellian nightmare shtick, lest you observe an infraction without reporting it, thereby "hold guilt" – they had you inside and out) could subject you to a quick sanction, from as mild as a "pull-up" to as serious as a shaved head. A pull-up is a verbal, on the spot, succinct public reprimand issued by another family member with strength, pulling you up the metaphorical "stick" from where down at the bottom was "skid-row values" degeneracy, up towards the opposite end, up at decency and respectable citizenship – shouting at you for the least provocation and slightest infraction, like being caught leaning against a wall for a moment, or like littering by dropping a cigarette butt on the pavement, "quit eyeballing! " "skid-values, pick-up that butt!," whatever fit, or one of their favorite standby suitable for any infraction, "BE MORE AWARE!" — all to which it was forbidden to respond in any communicative way. "DON'T REACT!" They'd yell if you began to, not even by facial gesture, just swallow it, even if you felt it was "invalid." Ignoring or defying a "*don't react*" by responding in any detectable way aside from immediate, total and silent passive compliance would invariably lead to a later formal dressing down, a ceremonial *haircut* as they called it. When confronted by one of the notepad bearing Expeditors making the rounds and informed that someone had *dropped a haircut* on you – a whisper to the closest expeditor "Joe was eye-balling Jane," followed by a trip to *the floor* expeditor's desk where it would be logged, later following up, they would tell you the charge and ask "*valid or invalid?*" but not who dropped it, creating constant division and suspicion, to which you could only respond with one word or the other – nothing else – just for the log record – it wouldn't change anything however you answered. It was another formality. That's all. Plenty of formalities here. A *haircut* was an official, highly ritualized, closed-door, several minute, full-blown reprimand by the resident head-honcho *Chief Expeditor*, a random and rotated suitably indoctrinated resident or two with *strength* and when serious enough a staff member who would take turns balling you out (pulling you up) and wherein depending on the severity or frequency of the infraction may pronounce a term with an *object lesson* – a set period of further restriction (no reacting to

music, no desert, no card games, no time off, etc.,) and ritual humiliation, a punishment like wearing a full length, chin to ankles cardboard sign (the object) stating the nature of your infraction, for example a generic "I think I'm above the rules – *confront me!* " or case specific like mine: "*I try to portray a toughguy and push you away with my intellectual rap - confront me!* " might be assigned. An extra dirty work detail might be added – a concurrent term with the object or the ultimate sanction for violating a *Cardinal Rule*, a shaved head for males and a stocking cap for the ladies along with a thirty day *contract*. *Haircuts* were scheduled for a short time after the actual alleged offense occurred, usually a few days after being *dropped* (like *dropping a dime*, ratting, the cost of a payphone call to the cops) and everything about and surrounding it recorded in the logbook: who dropped it, what, when, who sat in on the event, what if any pronouncement was decreed, the exact terms, etc., then copied the next day in duplicate form by the resident workers in the house business office.

The floor was also the place to leave my daily musings in chalk dust on that big, rolling blackboard, unofficially set aside for my near-exclusive use (not including, of course, the surreptitious means of breaking bans with my current *objet d'amor*) or just shoot the breeze on work breaks, and in the evenings after dinner before it was *cleared* at eleven, except for the rotated two-resident night-crew, an Expeditor and a resident with *strength* on *floor duty,* who kept awake and aware should something happen before daybreak requiring attention: the sudden return of a *splitee*, a fire, a flood, locusts, frogs, vermin, etc. The night-crew on Saturday nights had actual work to do though, they had to strip, mop, wax and buff the linoleum *house* floor and got to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, drink coffee all night while at it and watch the first seasons of *Saturday Night Live* while at it, the ground-breakers: John Belushi, Dan Akroyd, Gilda Radner, Garret Morris, Bill Murray, Laraine Newman, Jane ("*you ignorant slut*") Curtin and Chevy Chase, the greats except for Chase who rarely made me laugh. To me he was a deliberate *douchebag*, an unfunny, preppie

WASP, over-rated and annoying, being caught on camera picking his nose isn't really all that amusing. Fortunately though he was only on the first one or two seasons, I wanted to see Belushi and Morris, anybody, even the *ignorant slut* pummel him on live TV before they could be stopped, play it off like it was part of the skit, support for the *not-ready-for-prime-time* theme. Small consideration. Best part of the Saturday night *floor crew* gig was you got to sleep late on Sundays; a couple hours extra shut-eye and rare moments of something approximating privacy. Another one of their totalitarian prohibitions was being alone, you couldn't even sit by yourself on *the floor* and have a smoke while reading the paper without an Expeditor coming by to *confront* you by demanding to know what was *wrong* and then direct you to go find people to sit with. *Don't react!* To them you were *isolating* which meant up to no good or *flagging* as in nonverbally signaling for help or attention in TC speak, either way any form of peaceful solitude was *verboten,* all part of the relentless day-to-day intrusions so it was really cool, *floor crew*, a break that felt like Christmas Eve even in the summer such that being selected was a Topic House score, one among few, even falling to me once or twice. But I'm ahead of myself.

The Family

Jim Jones told me a couple of things that stuck. The first, was that *navy sailors had about the same social status as mailmen*, but that meant nothing. "Social status?" I'm an outlaw. The second though? "*You'll hate loving us*," meant something and he was almost right, half right, love wasn't gonna happen, though I did make many memorable acquaintances and friends. Among the eclectic gathering and dynamic flow of *people in crisis*, the residents or *family*, or inmates included in no particular order and in brief: little Wolfgang Peters the *dopefiend* hairdresser, a Jimmy Cagney-Rocky Sullivan type who sounded like PO Cleava, while standing about an inch or so below me at eye-level. He was a street-wise, ex-con, dope addict from the city's lower east side with a *Wings-style* bleached-blonde

mullet and a fading butterfly tattoo on the web between his left thumb and forefinger marking where he shot-up, and was always warning guys that if they kept it up (whatever that might be) could "*lose your grippers*." Even without knowing what the hell he was talking about, clearly, you did not want that to happen, the warning seemed to come from a well, informed authority. *Craven* and *Lacey Wilcox,* the two black brothers, not twins but close, they were sadistic jocks from Long Beach, not quite good enough for college ball so instead went haywire bad and together were a two-man, terrifying, crime wave, breaking and entering and grand larceny. Craven was naturally built, like a heavyweight, Greek titan, and Lacey? Though not as buff was twice as mean, but neither any better at crime than sports, selling locally stolen property to local undercover PD, yet still somehow, at least in the county's eyes both redeemable. Another allegedly redeemable but certainly memorable character from somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon was another redheaded guy, a blue-eyed, half-Albino thirty-year-old, quiet ex-con with a Johnny Cash style haircut named Ray McKee. Ray, built like a middle-weight had the four fingers of his right hand, top side, between the first two joints tattooed with the four Hebrew letters *yud – hey – vov – hey*, one letter per finger, an ancient acronym formulation for the name of G-d, which roughly translates to *is*, *was*, *always will be* and often mis-transliterated as *Jehovah*. When he did a stickup it would be those fingers that gripped the handle and pulled the trigger, thereby making robberies sacraments. At some point, I asked why a soft-spoken, southern, gentile, gentleman like him chose that, but his mumbled reply was indecipherable, which to me meant *don't ask again*. Okay. So I didn't. Case closed. They were his knuckles, not mine. Another gentile fellow who crossed my path and left a mark was big, affable Ritchie Lawson, a local barroom brawler and drunk tank regular who when on the sauce became violently anti-social, and he sauced often enough to land him there. The middle-aged, big fella' told me he was my "big Christian protector." All right pal, if you say so, never a good policy to rely on or turn away friends and allies, so *thanks*. If Ritchie had kept in shape? He'd a made a fitting sparring partner for Chuck

Wepner, same type, looks, and size so his words, and intentions stuck. Another memorable dude, closer to my age and background but much cooler in temperament, much closer to Don Brink's than mine, who could fake it while I couldn't be bothered, a fellow Hebe and son of a big time bookie from the fancy Five Towns named Harvey Margolies. Harvey was a junkie, "tragic magic," i.e., heroin, always wearing a slightly surprised look on his half-grinning mug, always amused but for no discernable cause. Once, he nodded out on dope, so deeply cradled at death's door, his knees pressed so tightly together in a stupor they cut off the skin's blood supply at the contact point leaving two visible, mirrored scars. With that as an *object lesson* Harvey didn't need a reminder of the stakes, but he definitely needed treatment, an easy call though this form was in great doubt, the amused look seemed to suggest: *okay, sure, right on, whatever you say*. Then, there was Michael Wilkinson, another pierced nosed, dark-skinned and trim young brotha' from the rougher edges of New York City, Rockaway, Queens, a fearsome gang-leader with jailhouse tattoos, who turned out to be one of two men that taught me the ethic of hard work in this lifetime. We were both in *the pan*, low-status dish and pot washers cleaning out the filthy slop-sink three times a day, seven days a week. Me? My regular. Him? On a *shoot-down* from Department Head, I forget which one, but we were teamed up after meals to "bust it out," wash and dry all the plates, cups, utensils, industrial pots, trays and pans which the faster we got done the sooner we'd be off *the floor* with free-time, a hateful, dirty job he'd attack to get over quickly by passing department head inspection the first time, which were dependably thorough and exacting. Since we were a team, *Starsky and Hutch* he'd call us, looking over and down his right shoulder at his co-pilot and right-hand-man-in-the-pan, "*c'mon Kap, bus' it out, Starsky'n Hutch, c'mon, le's go!*" he'd say, encouraging, needing me to keep up with him, so, not wanting to risk setting him off, I'd seen him turn practically white with frustrated rage when disrespected by staff, spittle forming on his clenched lips, biting that tongue, almost trembling, afraid that earring would pop out of his nose then me and by lost grippers would be a goners, so I attacked it

too, three times a day for weeks on end, hence learning the ways and means of *bustin' it out,* a useful lesson to bring with me into the world outside.

Another memorable TC chap by the name of Jack Moreno*,* an up from Long Island and down-from-Dannemora State Prison badass. This apex criminal, 220 pounds of solid muscle, looking like a tattooed lumberjack, a full-time, mustachioed, union ironworker, and part-time stickup man impersonated narcotics detectives to rob drug dealers for kicks and rushes, as well as free quantities of expensive, high-quality, uncut illegal drugs. Other than that dramatic yet understandable eccentricity, he was an honorable guy, at least that was everyone's impression of him, including mine. Not every convict gets to have Topic House in his corner at sentencing time, so, in the eyes of some, there was reason to believe that still in his late twenties, he might one day shed his criminal skin and emerge as one of the good guys, or at least a reasonably civilized citizen, a tax-payer, not a sponge on the criminal justice system. Who knows? It's always a gamble but the courts and the *house* thought he was worth the shot. The big guy was temporarily released from the upstate *big house* to Topic House custody pending sentencing on his current beef and the associated parole violation. Staff figured a 140 lbs wiseass like me who thought he was smarter than everyone else needed that kind of *guidance* and they were right, so they made him my second *contract holder.* For thirty days he was on my ass all day every day, "*get up, Rob. Time to do what you gota' do, Rob,*" my 6 AM alarm announced when whatever that happened to be – it was definitely time to do. Contracts aren't designed to be comfortable or fun and a good contract holder makes sure they're not. They want to break you, like a boot camp for "people in crisis." Work details, dirty ones while everyone else is still asleep, early morning exercise, deprivations, regular public humiliation rituals, the works, but nothing compared with what he'd been doing upstate laboring as a convict lumberjack, cutting down trees in a sort of prison-forest chain-gang populated by savages and cutthroats, with and without badges, housed in an Adirondack wilderness trailer park where, in

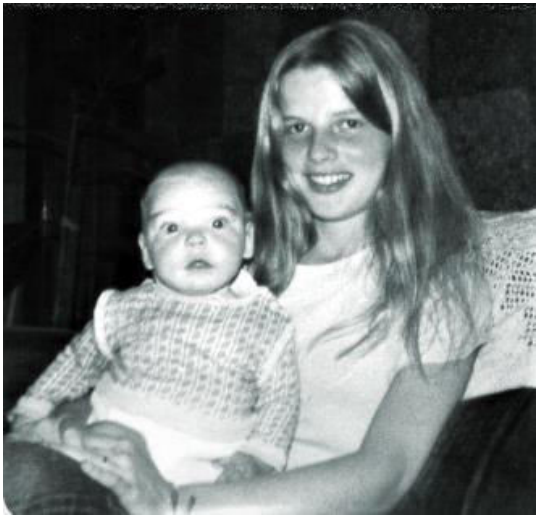
his words, he'd eat enough and work enough swinging axes and loading logs onto flatbeds with heavy ropes and iron chains to get *"pretty fuckin' big and pretty fuckin' healthy,"* so he wasn't at all inclined to go easy on yours truly. Not at all, but he didn't overdo it either, right on the line. If he said, "jump" I jumped, no point testing him either. Though Topic House was light work to him, he was still very much on edge, *unfree.* Added to the routine TC degradations, deprivations and incarceration Jack was under the additional intense and constant pressure of knowing for a fact *Big Jack was going back* to a tiny prison cell or an outdoor chain-gang, the only question was for just how long. The *House* would be making their recommendations to the judge so, no, I didn't fool with this drill sergeant-from-Dannemora for obvious reasons, dropped my reflexive sarcasm and kept my *grippers*; more on them and others like John Green, the dark haired and eyed, ex-air force officer and Vietnam vet who frequently joked derisively about how his fellow flymen referred to atomic bombs as "nukes," how cavalier they were about the tools of Armageddon, as if he were their moral superior, casting ironic judgment from above. The guy was a douche bag, plain and simple. At some point we'd have issues, that annoying prick, one of them, not the *sex* or *drugs* ones was of the Cardinal variety. Guess. More about more maybe later but aside them? The staff? If they thought this *Noodlehead* was sticking around for even thirty seconds longer than Samenga ordered they didn't know him anywhere near as well as they or doctor-know-it-all Jones thought they did. Think Lynyrd Skynyrd, hear *Free Bird*. That was me. Hear me? "And this bird you'll never chaaaaange..."

Lastly, and most vividly there was the nineteen year old *Jennifer Blom*, a desperately beautiful, brown-eyed, natural-blond with an hour-glass shape and the soft, pale, glow of flawless Nordic skin, a criminal girl who used a brick on the head of a local county sheriff's deputy to register her objection to his handcuffing her skinny, long-haired, and drug-dealing, outlaw boyfriend. That got her mandated, just like me to Topic House where I fell in line with all the other locked-up, hungry and denied young men who monitored her every

public word and move, searching, praying and imagining a possible way in, eventually becoming obsessed with her to the point where she all but eclipsed *you-know-who* and without so much physicality as even a shared kiss, all the magic through the eyes, body language and between the ears. One brief, surreptitious glance at her unfathomably perfect plump behind, packed tightly into form fitting, faded blue jeans while she sauntered quickly past was enough to keep me obsessed with that image for days, if not weeks or longer at a time. Now *that* was a sacrament. Those eyes though? The soft and warm, brown loveliness always seemed a bit sad, on the verge of tears; there she was, young Miss Blom in her prime separated from her man, her true love, the brick didn't help, he was in prison and she was here denied even *letter writing privileges*, the staff would label their relationship a *negative contract* and so it would be *banned*. Totally. Permanently. For as long as she was there, and for the poor, young aspiring Bonnie Parker that might mean functionally forever. She wasn't mandated for a simple finite term like me, counting time, checking off calendar days, she was mandated until completion and that might mean she'd see him again just after *never*. Despite her loss and wounded heart, those eyes would occasionally ignite when she'd flash a quick, penetrating look of quiet excitement at you, which, of course, would hook you in, permanently. All it takes is once, a single, vivid impression to have a guy carefully monitoring the ever-shifting *house* equations, angles, and probabilities, scheming for an opportunity to make it happen. In fact, she gave me a chance late one misty spring afternoon towards the end of my term, just after a warm rain about a month or so before my time would be up and I'd be free again. Unbeknownst to me, she followed me up to the top floor of the decrepit, crumbling burnt out shell of the *old house,* another *banned* location and activity, where I'd discretely escape now and then to enjoy a smoke for a moment or two of peace and privacy. Alerted to the intrusion by the sound of a sudden creak or a snap from the surrounding rubble, followed by a quiet footstep, I turned around to find her right there, standing maybe ten or fifteen steps away, just the two of us alone in the crumbling debris of the slate roof, shattered window

glass and collapsed and broken oak rafter beams littering the floor. Under the snug-fitting hood of her red sweatshirt, Jennifer stared off into the distance through the ragged gaps in the shattered brick walls, as if focused on something specific she was searching for but couldn't find, silently and motionless, like neither of us was actually there. At the time, as an *object lesson* for my repeated *felonious eyeballing* attentions we were placed on a *total ban*, not permitted to interact at all, that was how they handled flirtation, so, by just being up there she put herself at risk and we both knew it. The only communication between us up to that point, aside our weekly ninety-minute *set group* therapy sessions conducted with the same "set" of six or seven or eight members and two staff counselors moderating, wherein *bans, total* and *partial* were temporarily suspended, was through the big chalkboard on *the floor* whereupon my daily compositions of poems, sketches and coded notes for her were inscribed in colored chalk dust. Everyone could see my musings but only she, I fancied, comprehended the thinly disguised messages of drawn hearts, stars, soaring kites, and sailboats, etc. We also both knew my plan to leave the day, the hour if not the minute my time was fully served while she would have to remain behind or be in violation of her sentence, either a fugitive or locked up, imprisoned, jailed. To have any real chance at her would require my remaining behind there with her *incarcerated* beyond the expiration of my term which was out of the question, as strong as my desire for her was my desire for freedom was stronger which to her seemed like betrayal at worst or rejection at least so my hesitant guess was that she was up there with an unspoken offer, giving me a chance to reconsider by making my move. *What was I gonna do?* Walking cautiously towards her, still not a word between us I watched carefully her expressionless face for a sign, a clue, a cue, a word, but not even a glance, nothing, just her sudden phantom like presence. *What did she want?* As I got closer and closer, near enough to whisper or perhaps even kiss, maintaining my silence while focused on her eyes which were blank, she kept that fixed stare into space, nothing, so I let the moment pass, not saying a word, instead decided to just move on continuing past her down the

stairs and out of the immense, fallen shell of the *old house* leaving well enough alone. I didn't want to get her into more trouble or possibly misread her intentions through crazy, vague, mixed signals. Chicks? *Who ever really knows?* Had she met my glance, uttered a single word, or had I explicitly broken the *ban,* my entire life from that point on might have changed, such is the power of a crushed butterfly wing, but she didn't and neither did I so that's how it went. Or didn't. A few days later, returning to the kitchen from a routine trip to the dumpster emptying the dinner slop sink there they were, the two of them, she and another rascally resident young guy, a long-haired doper, Neil Young lovin' drug-dealing thief from Astoria, Lenny Jibert, just her type playing Frisbee together behind the trailers laughing joyfully at the inane fun of gliding a plastic toy disc back and forth at such short range, him trying to sing *Harvest* in lazy, stoned, Neil Young falsetto, the disappointing picture made unmistakably clear just from that. Despite the giddy laughter they were serious and I got it right away, *it was over, she was his, I was out*. He swung and hit I choked in the clinch.



Jennifer with Lenny's progeny photo she sent from the lam out west, delivered by my surrogate, Hannibal Hayes, upon return from his epic, cross-country, motorcycle sojourn to Alaska. Gone fishin.'

"Sky rockets in flight… afternoon delight…" (Bill Danoff)

What a horrible song and they played it over and over again, day after day, hour after hour, again and again, almost but not quite as bad as that crap Eagles song, both inexplicably huge hits, not exactly *Sunshine of Your Love* or *Eleanor Rigby,* much different planets and far apart. Right up there with *chimpface* I hated them both, *Afternoon Delight* and *Hotel California*, hated worse that they were hits. On top of being horrible tunes they reminded me that the *Age of Aquarius* was fully dead and totally over, and me being born about ten years too late largely missed the party, which I was resigned to but these songs? The cheap crap was rubbing it in that in the here and now in captivity, in addition to everything else, was much harder to bear. The sixties were a creative renaissance; this was a return to creative conformity, morning regularity. The black folks that effectively dominated the music had the worst possible taste in music, everything was dance, dance, dance, except for Stevie Wonder's wondrous magnum opus *Songs in the Key of Life* and they overplayed that too. Challenging them, the one time at a Family Group when I did, they called me "racist." Right. But that *Sky Rockets* song was so bad, so falsely happy and giddy and horribly cheery it only underscored how intensely opposite to that life was and how painfully my particular reality actually fit in. It actually made me wanna cry sitting there the next day after being taken off *the chair* for that hostile interrogation when they would award themselves unofficial points for breaking you down to tears. I never even cried in *gladiator school*, so these hobos and half-wits weren't gonna make that happen. I'd sit on that fucking chair until next July 9th before giving anyone that sick satisfaction. Meanwhile, assigned to one of the *shops* where they played it all the time, the business office, the grounded sky-rocket began work at his first *house* job, entry-level tortuous monotony. The task was copying by hand the log books recorded the day before, detailing the times, locations, and occurrences of every official event possible to make a note of: who came on *the property*, where from, who left, where to, what time, what was said, what wasn't, by whom, to whom, about what,

haircuts dropped, haircuts given, GMs, the weather, object lessons assigned, whatever, all *house business*, whatever and whatever again, busy work made by self-important jackasses on county sponsored ego trips for their brainwashed and bullied charges, us, me, the work of the Family Business Office. Stationed in that hot trailer all day with a couple of less than beautiful street-scarred, jail-house tattooed, drug-addicted, teeth missing dyke *residents,* among other assorted marginal family members who had *strength,* therefore authority over me and worse? They loved to listen to that Top 40 garbage, and that nauseating tune tormenting me was in the Top Ten, so we heard it at least once an hour, again and again, over and over taunting me. The *revolution* was not only never televised it never even happened, even the pretence was gone, what there ever really was of it after Kent State, the end of the draft and the fall of Saigon, and it left me behind, missed it, I got that but this was spitting on its grave. The great *Airplane* devolved into the mediocre *Starship*, the over-indulged, make-believe youth revolutionaries caved to the same napalm-producing *establishment* that this song sprang from and sold, the buttoned-downed and bow-tied, Warner Brothers, Wall Street Journal and DNC briefcase carrying establishment. I would almost have rather spent the year on the Prospect Chair eating PBJs on stale white bread, and though it crossed my mind more than once, it wasn't really an option, time wouldn't pass any more quickly that way, so instead endured the stultifying monotony and the abject lunacy and the hand cramps, taking orders from yesterday's trick-turning, shoplifting, and bitter, dead-end, street bitches, sitting in a suffocating trailer of the county-run funny-farm in Mitchell Field, copying the handwritten records of Topic House on to yellow legal pads. It wasn't that simple though, just copying, they had to be exact duplicates, perfectly reproduced down to the letter, one tiny mistake on those stinking yellow pads, an omitted or misplaced comma for instance meant the whole page had to be rewritten, and always, the ever-hovering maidens from the sad side of Lesbos Island singing along to that horribly cheery song. All I could think of was time; time, time and more time, doing time, sky rockets in flight, and of course beyond

mere time and afternoon delight pulling the plug entirely, the option of just walking off, fuck it, fuck it all, just let it go, *viva la revolucion*, fuck the whole world, fuck it again and *escape.*

Out of frustrated despair a routine quickly developed, regularly telling myself I'd just *split* after the next meal, the *fuck it* formula, make it as a fugitive, figure something out – run away to China – somewhere – anywhere – Dodge City, the moon, Alice's Restaurant, the Haight, I'd get out – make the break – really – soon – just get through the next meal, this meal, no point leaving broke on an empty stomach. There was a permanent fist-sized lump in my throat – I wanted to bust out and cry – I wanted to bust out and run – I just wanted to bust out, to bust something, somebody, anybody, why me, why now, why here, why this? All crashing in on me, an avalanche of misery and self-pity, Topic House in Mitchell Field, a trailer park planted in shadows behind the local, *shit-for-brains* community college and one huge, burned out shell of a military complex, an officer's quarters we were told, a battered but still towering three story, sixty room, slate-roofed mansion of stone, brick, steel, glass and oak bordering us on the south they called the *old house* where Topic House first started in the late 60s when the program was much harsher and way more fanatical than now. For example, contracts had no set termination point, they could go on indefinitely until they either broke you or you split, and shaved heads as object lessons for the females too, no vanity cop-outs, soft stuff like stocking caps for the ladies in those days, they meant real business and *equal* meant *equal* like a dope addiction that didn't care about male or female before degrading "equal" to meaning shrieking demands for unearned privilege *equal.* It was *life or death* as they saw it, *splitees* OD'ng and dying or busted for heavies nearly every week. Bye-bye. The real thing, the *old house* and I don't mean soda, too real for the latter day misfits, staff and residents alike, show-boaters and freeloaders performing for county paychecks, judges and the parole board. All this *treatment* going on in the *old house* before fire gutted it and the temporary trailers replaced it permanently – no one even bothered to tear it down and certainly no one had any plans to

rebuild or restore it so it just sat there looming above and behind us in the background, a silently decaying presence, hovering, withering in its own steadily creeping, Dickensian rot. *Great*. No expectations. Not here. Mitchell Field – from where Lindbergh made his famous flight – big friggin' deal – like the bicentennial bash – who gave a flying rat's wet ass? He had a two-way love affair with the Nazis anyway so fuck him and his *Spirit* and I'm incarcerated in a freak show with tattooed, lesbian, street-hookers, make-believe sociologists, self-proclaimed therapists, real convicts, parolees, dropouts, fake hippies, a few former actual hippy holdovers, jailhouse dope fiends, spoiled preppie drug addict brats, assorted closet cases and brainwashed conmen, occasional *cosa nostra* types from Brooklyn or Queens, and even a handful of maladjusted brainiacs for a year, a whole freakin' year. How I was ever gonna make it through this day after day, week after week, month after month there was no clue, it was barely manageable minute to minute, my entire future hanging by the moment on the strength of a fraying thread.

See, the House never kept anybody there by any kinda' physical force, not even the suggestion of it – it went way beyond that – much deeper. Anybody for whom that would be necessary didn't belong there and the folks who did get there, well, they were pretty carefully screened by the likes of mighty Sue Andrews and her crusading ilk, they'd belong in the cages behind iron bars which is where they were or were headed as was I before this and might yet again be – that was the fact for most of us inmates, residents, *the family* but for then, those of us there? Well, a decisive degree of volition was required. In that strict sense we were all voluntary participants in this tightly knit laboratory, compression-chamber of totalitarian style group therapy – each of us though under our own varying and personal degrees of stress and circumstance: paroled, sentenced, pre-sentencing, hiding out, voluntary, all of it which produced this single, binding, common element: *crisis*. Yeah, crisis, this was a fucking crisis all right, all day and all night crisis, relentless crisis, a judge sentenced me here where if I left before my

year was up? Shit would really hit the crisis fan much, much worse, no doubt. That's my crisis. I'd already been to the county lockup a couple times before – last occasion being that thirty day bid about a year earlier, which left a very bad taste in my mouth and cigarette scars on my arms among other not-so-tender reminders, so there was no desire for a return engagement, none at all, or to what would be – certainly – even worse, likely "upstate," Gladiator Graduate Academy, so for-get-it, not county jail for skid bidders but state prison for convicts with Jack Moreno types unbound by any house rules as neighbors, that was my stress, that was my destiny, my crisis. Treat *that!* That in mind looking at and out past the cyclone fence there were the community college students hanging out by the parking lot, radios blasting the Bee Gees' *You Could Be Dancin'*, laughter, school books on car hoods, normal not freak show stuff, no one wearing cardboard signs or stocking caps, faculty, staff, the mailmen, truck drivers, passers bye, free people while my heart was twisting in self-pity, rage and shame, incarcerated, me, same age, not free to move ahead but a prisoner stuck in limbo. "*Freedom is just another word for nothin' left to lose*" of which there was still plenty, like my very life itself, as made clear by chest-pounding *Slim* they didn't care if I *broke* in the joint, so not really free at all. That said I kept looking, *I wouldn't even need to hop it, I could just walk right past the gate* without so much as a look back or a *goodbye.* I came with nothing and could leave the same way, easy, observing earlier examples of others who'd come and gone and had at some point quite enough and made the leap. Usually one or two *family* members sometimes friends would follow and try to talk them out of it. Sometimes they'd succeed and turn a would-be *splitee* around and other times not – they'd try to turn you around by appealing to common sense or guilt or love or fear (*you can't make it without us, the house, remember where you were before you came in, you'll die*) just like a cult or a combination of any and all of them – maybe two or three members at once clamoring behind even if it was just *responsible concern* as opposed to genuine or personal or *true concern* as differentiated by TC lingo. Either way it would be an earnest effort without really getting in your face or trying to

physically stop or block you – it wasn't that kinda' trip – it was more about instilling and manipulating or controlling by guilt, fear and dependency, even love, powerful connections to friends, the *family*, safety, hope for a future, *B-Stage*, graduation, the comfort of an odd cocoon, the constant stimulation of a dynamic and eclectic community, three decent squares, medical care, clean clothes, soap and hot water, and a specific, well guided and financed plan for later making it out in *the world* drug-free, clean, like another pal named Eugene Snook, yup, *Snook*, a soft-spoken, smart but sarcastic young guy they were sending to welding school. Pretty cool. He played it just right. Of course, all these carrots backed up and reinforced by the threat of the big sticks, in my case the clink, or for almost all, a certain return to the degradation of active drug addiction, *the streets*, prostitution, beat-ups, abandonment, loneliness and worse even still the ultimate disincentive, a premature death after a life of self-inflicted, pointless pain and suffering. Powerful considerations and connections, but none of them had really set in with me yet, connections of the human sort, determined to avoid them, plus still in a state of sort of fading, youthful denial – childish reverie imagining there was a way out if I looked and searched hard enough and was just able to summon up the courage to take a step or two over the next line and be *out,* but for then, for the time being I just kept putting it off, minute by minute, one meal to the next, one night to the next morning telling myself *I'll split tomorrow* after breakfast, after lunch, etc., etc., etc., until there just over a week, thinking *fifty one more*, Zeus help me – no fucking way, working in that hot damn trailer in the middle of my seventeenth summer, listening to that horrid song, lump in my throat 24/7, humoring that brainwashed, dingbat, do-gooder *big brother* Don Brink and those fully indoctrinated, pathetic, office coworkers, "*sky rockets in flight – afternoon delight*" until one, hot and depressing *afternoon delight* too many the damn just broke and this stuck, stubborn, rocket finally took flight out the trailer door, across *the property* he went – *lift-off* – no nothing, no looks back, no Prospect Chair, no *fuckyou*s and no *goodbye*s either, just outa' there. Don tried to follow me and I gave him the courtesy of not turning around to curse him out or make any

threats – just ignored him and kept flying while trying not to hear him reminding me of probation, the judge, jail, and the sad, stark fact that I had no place to go. He had the picture but I wasn't hearing any of it, I'll come up with somewhere – here's to *afternoon delight* while "*someone's knockin' on the door – somebody's ringin' the bell,*" anybody's, just lookin' for a moment or two of my own at still only seventeen *afternoon delight,* and with that past the gate I was gone.

"Homeward bound, I wish I was…" (Paul Simon)

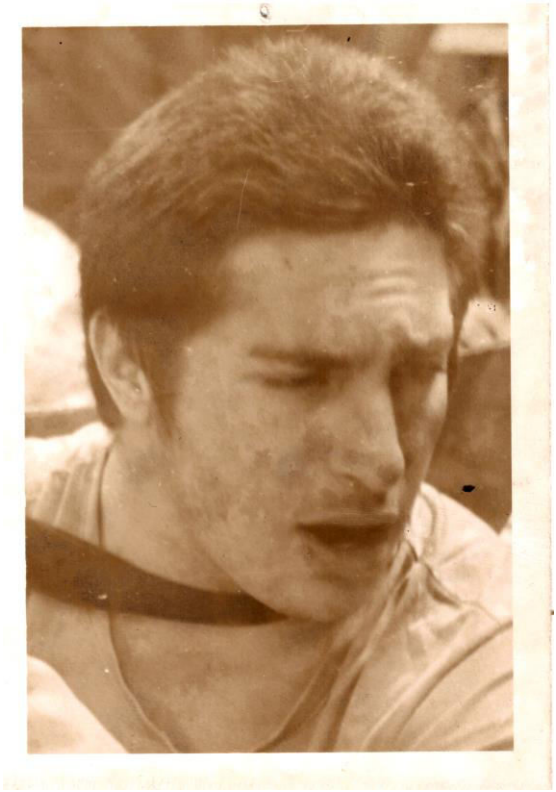
Rockville Center never felt much like home to me where Brooklyn always did, despite only living there until about ten years old, long enough though for it to set deeply in childhood stone. Philadelphia, where my mother's side set down immigrant roots two or three generations back did too a bit, though only just born but never really lived there. Not the Rock though, nope, never, even with the seven years spent not quite coming of age there, too preppie, too nowhere, too passively conformist and too nothing filled with nobodies pretending to be somebodies as if there was nothing else to do in life like becoming the fullest possible expression of your own authentic self, where nothing ever felt exactly right and though there were always friends, even aside the *Droogs,* I hated being there and felt hated by mostly everybody else which was exactly the way it hada' be so no triumphant homecoming feeling to be had like from the county lockup, especially not after the hours spent hoofing and hitchhiking the four or five miles all the way from Mitchell Field. But there I went, the town my parents moved to from Brooklyn, bought a house in, where I finished up grade school yeshiva, was bar-mitzvah'd, completed junior high and dropped out of high-school at, Rockville Fucking Center. *There's no place like home* some say, true maybe, but this wasn't it, not even good witches with magic slippers could change that, it might as well have been Oz, or the dark side of the moon, but not having any other place else I could think of to go `cause short of access to my own actual rocket-

ship or time machine there wasn't any. With all that endemic estrangement there I went anyway, yup, knocking on my parents' front door like a hopeful, desperate prodigal son. Not knowing what else to do with their *out of control* and now about to be *fugitive* son – just like Gibbs Williams the lauded Greenwich Village shrink predicted a year or two before – *a "nomadic fugitive*" they were out of answers, poor folks, the *Frankenstein* monster returns to the scene of the crime once again so they let me in and there spent a restless night waiting for the next shoe to drop. Next morning it dropped coming in the form of a familiar quick knock on my bedroom door and guess who? Yeah, there he was, all suit jacket and snarls, Cleava and his wordless, bushy-headed backup man come to return the runaway so again with the handcuffs and the smug warnings about *playing it close* and having to *do what had to be done* and this would help *make a man of me* and really *had no choic*e unless I wanted to go back to jail instead. They were right of course, impossible to deny but still had no idea how to stick out a full year in that aluminum-can collection nuthouse. As we headed up the Hempstead Turnpike in an unmarked four-door towards the Uniondale trailer park my inescapable reality began to set in deeper, *no exit*. This time when they dropped me off at the guardhouse met again by an Expeditor – the tone was much less phony gracious and a lot more sincerely solemn, cold, matter of fact and quick to the point. The fun, it was clear was really about to start; back to the House and onto the Prospect Chair as a *splitee* now, no longer the neophyte *Noodlehead* to be patient with. Playtime over. By about hour three or four it gets mighty uncomfortable on that armless, wall-facing, steel back and seat throne of shame where eventually, out of sheer boredom you start reading that delusional prayer, you'd have to keep your eyes closed not to see it. Try closing your ears for a few hours too, both, wide awake. It was now only mid morning when something told me this time it was going to be a very long, uncomfortable and altogether unpleasant day.

At about 9 PM that evening after *the floor* was first cleared from chow then *the house* later repopulated with residents, perhaps as

many as a hundred or so – practically the entire *family*, chatting away, the usual cards, chess and checkers games, goofing around, television set on in the background of one corner, stereo playing Frankie Crocker on BLS in another, the Expeditor's desk stationed in a third, just about numb from sitting for ten or so hours buried in anticipatory anxiety and self-pity, the usual again – *how the hell was I gonna make it through an entire fucking year of this*, wings clipped at seventeen? *Shit!* All my friends out in the world getting high, listening to rock, having a blast driving around and getting laid or at least trying to when a sudden tap on my shoulder from behind alerted me to the presence of two Expeditors informing me it was time to get up and face the music. Gathering myself together and picking up *the chair* in the prescribed robotic manner, I followed them back to the same room first admitted through, only this time behind the shut paneled door there would be a slight surprise, it was mainly staff now, maybe the Chief Expeditor and Don and there was no harassment, now even more solemn and *matter-of-fact.* Apparently, despite the fact that my being there at all was in no meaningful way, shape or form a manifestation of my will, they put me wise to the fact that in their eyes, like all returning *splitees* I had to *earn* my way back into *the family* (as if I wanted to be there – good grief – earn fucking *what?* Didn't they realize this was a prison sentence for me? Earn this? Was I supposed to pretend otherwise? The whole charade was against my fucking will, fighting every moment the urge to leave as though the rest of my life depended on staying, which it did, all that they seemed oddly and deliberately oblivious to) and the way that *privilege* was achieved, a regained Family status even as a *Noodlehead* was through what they called a *contract*. I had to accept being placed on a routine *Thirty Day Work Contract* meaning not actually in *the family,* rather a sort of slave to *the family*, doing the dirty jobs like cleaning the slop sink after meals, mopping the floors when the others have free time, taking out the night's trash before breakfast, cleaning the dumpsters, maybe with a toothbrush sporting a freshly shaved head, no days off, no deserts, no listening to music (don't be seen tapping time to any tunes even if it's *Sunshine of Your Love*) or watching TV, no

reacting, no this, no that, just constant slow burn misery, on and on and on under the constant supervision of a *contract holder*, like a ball-busting *big brother* only not helpful or friendly and was again responsible for monitoring your actions and knowing your exact whereabouts and doings 24/7, ratting you out to staff about every minor infraction lest he *hold guilt* and be liable for consequences himself. At the end of the thirtieth day, you were to be brought before the entire *family* at the final evening general meeting when together with the contract holder and staff they evaluate your month's performance, then as a group, by open vote, judge you worthy or not of rejoining *the family*. Has your performance proven your desire to rejoin the family? That was the question. If not? They might decide to extend your contract by a week or more, maybe even harshen its terms or just as was most often the case call it a *done deal* and let you back in, *mazal tov*, hallelujah, you're a *Noodlehead* again. That's your basic *contract* drama, it could even be more oppressive than the basic one described depending on the judgment of the staff gauged by the specific conditions that put you on the *contract* in the first place and who your *contract holder* was – could be a real TC maniac – but mine as a routine early *splitee's* was just going to be the basic 30 Day Work Contract and to keep



things simple they made good ol' soft spoken, ass kissing Don Brink the *holder*. Well, at least we were acquainted, he wasn't a maniac and I hadn't threatened him.

There's not much to remember about that first *contract* except that it certainly didn't make staying there any easier, not that it's intended to. It's intended, as a trial of your determination to stay there for whatever reason – doesn't matter at that point, not to them at least, only to you. Every minute of every hour of every day was spent fantasizing escape: where to go and what to do after getting there. One particular fantasy was to head out west, San Francisco or LA and become a merchant marine, a sailor or a dockworker; a *stevedore* living in a shabbily furnished room by the piers drinking a lot of beer between shifts while conceivably writing his colorful memoirs, seeing myself as sort of a Hebrew Archie Bunker not in the racist stereotype sense but in the good old fashioned, blue-collar, *common man with common sense* type. Whatever, who knows? It's a TV world and most of us are only extras or bit players, maybe an interesting or entertaining scene here or there and possibly with only a single audience member, themselves, but that was the vision scored by the Walrus: "*a working class hero is something to be…*" But to do any of the others, like maybe finally tracking down Abbie Hoffman and team up with him to right all the world's wrongs and have a lota' *free love* with beautiful, barefoot and topless hippie-girls while at it, first I had to actually be *free* and the only way to securely arrange that was to stay put here for now, *unfree,* back at that blasted business office and all that meant, now on a contract, even worse, where every day I'd go through the same familiar mental gymnastics, enduring the constant lump in my throat and the constant threat of a cluster attack, almost too depressed to even *eye-ball* the girls, humiliated, incarcerated, and not looking to make friends either, understanding almost from the chain link gate that that was how they got inside you, made you stay, friends, "family," peer pressure – so none of that, succinctly summed up thusly: no peers? No peer pressure. Case closed. I wasn't about to surrender my soul to nobody, not then, not ever, while my body was theirs my

spirit was still mine, hell I wasn't even looking to get married, not at all into needing or granting permissions, so? *I'm leaving after breakfast*, *today, yes, today, later, okay, just make it to lunch, just do the logbook thing then go right after lunch.* Come then? *Just after supper, leave on a full stomach, it's already the third week, only forty-nine left, less than four full seasons, the rest of summer, fall, winter, then spring and it's out,* but no matter how I counted it, no matter how I tried to make it seem doable, a year at seventeen is still a long, long time so *leave tonight* I considered again, right, *right after dinner, okay, not now, today's over,* placating myself, *tomorrow morning right breakfast it's over and out, I'm just gonna go* and again and again, day after day, over and over and over, a broken record repeating itself a thousand times an hour until the one late afternoon came when the warm winds of August and the brilliant glows of blue sky and golden sunlight carried the excited laughter of the college girls gathered just across the fence, just on the other side where I could breathe them, the soft, quiet breeze, the sounds of simple joy and genuine delight, when for one powerfully driven, unstoppable moment, the passion for life overcame the fear of death, and its urgent force pulled me back out past the chain-link gate where once again, this sky-rocket blasted off into desperate flight.

Turning point

This time though, after almost a month in exile something changed. Something soured even sourer than before. A vague but deep remoteness settled in. While technically on home turf the restless wanderer felt even more than ever before like a stranger in a strange land, as if the hopeful prodigal son was now more a stubborn, unwelcome trespasser. The few hours it took to make it back to the *Rock* by usual mode, part foot, part thumb, brought me there just in time to watch the midsummer sun set on my parents' three-bedroom palatial estate while hiding from view behind the cover of the thick trees just across the street. Walking around the block over and over,

each time passing the house, I'd stare at it again and wonder, never getting too close, not wanting to be seen so stayed across the street thinking, anxious, evaluating my dwindled options now pared down to a pressing and stark two, *to knock* or *not to knock?* Yeah, that was the question. Taking the scene in this time though? It no longer looked particularly recognizable as my home, the estrangement setting in, not even really a former one, no claim at all, it simply looked like just another plain house in the flat suburban row of three, four and five bedroom colonials and ranches with the usual leafy shrubs, tall elms and old oaks, the occasional proverbial picket fence, routine conventionality, morning regularity, small patches of back yard grass, one or two car garages, the neatly-paved driveways, basketball nets, scattered bicycles littering front lawns, how strange it seemed, like a traveling salesman from Mars might see it, weighing and considering, the late afternoon sun light slowly dissolving into dusk before fading softly into the dark of quiet night. Circumstances gradually became undeniably clear, pondering from my bivouac in the shadows, silently hollow and gut achingly painful, empty and alone, that it was actually not my house anymore and it was certainly no longer my home, in fact, it never felt like a home for me, loved, or even particularly wanted or safe there, a *bad seed,* as they dubbed me. I guess so. One time, at about ten or eleven, after being alerted to another of my endless school yard transgressions, Boris, the raging optometrist warned over the phone he was going to "*splatter your teeth all over the patio*" when he got there, *home*, then, choosing not to stick around for it, split, headed west along the Sunrise Highway by foot to the sanctuary of Mom-Mom's in Brooklyn, only to be picked up by him about three hours later that night at the gas station where I finally surrendered, chickening out on the busy nighttime highway after surprisingly making it almost halfway there. Mercifully spared the violence that time, ol' dad's ire was spent by around 8 PM when the service-station attendants turned me over to his loving care. *Home* like that. *Home is where you runaway from*. While surely we inhabited it for a time, my kid sister, mother and Boris, a shell of myself living inside the shell of others, whatever was or ever had been there of a home,

still crouched behind the neighbor's thick trees, even the pretense was gone so what was the point in knocking or asking to be let in? I wasn't welcome or wanted. Period. *Home is where you can never be turned away from.* The solution to my life problem, my "crisis" as so labeled, if there even was one, was clearly not there, way beyond all that, so another night at *mom and dad's* wouldn't provide it. Samenga wouldn't budge, and with no more Sue Andrews to intervene, Probation Officer Cocksucker Cleava would take me right back to jail, the monkey house this time. Door shut, past gone and in keeping with the last dim light of the setting sun, the future wasn't looking very bright either, as for the inescapable present? I couldn't really know or fully understand *how could all this terrible shit happen to a noble street savage kid like me?* Was I really so unlovable? Bleary-eyed but awake in that moment, uncertain while slowly emerging from any lingering denial, staggered but still standing, perhaps for the first time able to honestly face where it was all at: that everything*, everything*, yesterday, today, tonight, and tomorrow was fully and exclusively on me – period – no one else cared or would be meaningfully affected by my choice. Any residual doubts about that now resolved, the decision was painful but clear. Think: the Chambers Brothers' Time Has Come Today, "*I... have... no... home...*" as the wakeup call, so? *Not to knock*. Childhood gone.

Home Back Then

Back in my early *bad seed* days, still in Brooklyn, beginning at maybe seven or eight or nine years old, I'd somehow manage to scrounge up pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters for Saturdays to walk a few blocks from residential Ocean Parkway up to commercial Coney Island Avenue and stand at a bus stop waiting for the next gas guzzling, gear-grinding, big, green 60s behemoth to roll on up, stop and board her, not having any particular destination in mind, just a direction, *away*, knowing that wherever it was, however far down the straight line we'd go, if you simply crossed the wide avenue and waited for the next one coming from the opposite

direction, board that one and exit where you first got on, no one could ever get lost; I'd get back home. Easy. These mini-round trip practice journeys offered the simple excitement of travel, better than TV, movies or books, real movement, temporary escape, a departure and an arrival, twice, never in the least apprehensive, rather excited, confident that my safe and timely return was all but assured, *just pay attention,* hit reverse, board back up and roll on home. It never failed so each week I'd increase the ranges and durations of the adventures just a bit, cautious not to go too far too soon but still expanding my world with each trip: the people, the stores, red-brown brick and black asphalt school-yards, churches ranging in architectural styles from straight line Dutch to complex and highly detailed gothic, a variety of shules with big Hebrew lettering on the outside walls of different sizes and styles, from modest *shtiebels* to imposing fortresses usually of some type of modest Romanesque design closer to the Dutch than the gothic, plain old gritty and congested parking lots, *Car 54 where are you* police cars, uniformed lady crossing guards, *Big Daddy's* hotdog joint, roller skaters, congregating hippies up to no good fun, strolling nuns on patrol, families on errands with baby-strollers, delis, hard-working shop-owners raising the protective metal window grating, orthodox students in black suit jackets and hats, dark Irish barrooms, brightly lit neon and aluminum diners, pizza places, carwashes, park-benches with relaxing old folks tossing bread crumbs to fearless Brooklyn squirrels, slick *cosa nostra* types playing cards on folding tables or gentler Gueseppis playing bocce ball on the lawns of small parks, panicking pigeons chased by toddlers and playful pups on leashes, kids skipping rope, swinging stickball bats and flying pink Spaldings sailing over school yard fences bouncing into traffic, spray painted street proclamations *end the war* and *ban the bomb* and *flower power*, basketball hoops without nets, movie theaters with imposing marquees, *Planet of The Apes*, *The Dirty Dozen*, 2001; *A Space Odyssey*, grinding garbage trucks, gas stations, honking taxis, neat apartment buildings, the occasional dusty ally hiding a broken down wooden shack, still standing but leaning from before the west was won, passing through all of Brooklyn-world just

outside the bus's big wide windows, better than cinemascope, the broad domains of numbered or named streets, the Kings Highway, Bay Parkway, Avenue J, 18th Avenue, East 7th Street, endless Brooklyn boulevards to explore, a *Magical Mystery Tour*, all that and from my bedroom apartment window on the fourth floor of an Ocean Parkway six story, one of few that tall on the tree-lined boulevard, monitoring the construction of the *Verrazano Bridge* using a homemade telescope cobbled together with a cardboard paper towel roll and lenses from my father's spare parts closet, they were, that was, for better and worse, *home;* where on Fourth of Julys my father took me up on the roof to watch the fireworks explode*,* planted tomato seeds in the *backyard* patch of dirt behind the laundry room I got from selling subscriptions to *Boy's Life* magazine to my neighbors, then watched plants begin to sprout a little later, amazing, later earning a very cool chemistry set the same way, which except from cartoons had no idea what to do with, so tried making explosives and potions that would turn you into a monster Mr. Hyde style, that traumatic Friday afternoon hearing the first whisper while standing on line to board the school bus home from the *Bialik School* named for the great *Russian-Hebrew* poet on Church Avenue, "*someone shot the president – the president is dead"* and a long weekend of gut wrenching agony, tears, retching, vomiting, sorrow and fright, watching Oswald's shooting again and again, Ruby must have really, really loved JFK, Jackie stunned in black, shock, little John-John's salute, it seemed the world was ending, where the Beatles came like prophets from another world to deliver us from the doom spelled out by the assassination, teaching us about joy and fun and being cool, singing my first songs *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and *Twist and Shout*, *home; w*alking my deaf, brown spotted Dalmatian *Dundig* along one of the two parkway's parallel and unpaved bridal paths; the night King was shot and the world was ending again while pairs of mounted policemen patrolled on horseback the grassy promenade, Ocean Parkway, the five mile length of the widest and longest six-laned residential boulevard in the world that had not quite actually ended yet, beginning on Neptune Avenue at the literal, physical end of the globe marked by

the limitless depths of the great, unfathomable Atlantic Ocean, the very one Columbus crossed, on its nearest coast just down the Parkway the legendary Coney Island with its iconic Parachute Jump, the Astro-Land rocket to the moon we once boarded that little *Bobby* believed was real, the gigantic Nathan's food hall you didn't even have to enter to get your hotdogs and fries from and the horrific, nightmarish image behind the wax-museum's front glass window wall, the figure of a man bound face up to the ground by spikes and ropes tied to his ankles and wrists while a calm and focused female dressed in colonial garb sang notes from a song-book aimed at attracting bees with the pitch of her voice that would swarm on his helpless figure which she'd covered with honey so they would sting him slowly to death while watching him suffer, and all the way to the Parkway's other end first my school and then the *Empire City*, the island in the sky at the top of the world with its sudden stark appearance once you reached the full elevated height of the Prospect Expressway, the stunning and towering behemoths of pointed and glittering gargantuan steel, glass, concrete and unimaginable light, *Manhattan*. Aside a low-key newspaper stand and convenience store by the subway stairs at the and far end by the shore, no shops allowed on the Parkway, no businesses or commercial traffic, no billboards, graffiti, litter or crime, just stone and brick, masonry and slate one and two-family homes every one a compact fortress, the many proud and welcoming synagogues, Ashkenazi and Sephardi their styles distinct and unique, at the midpoint the sudden silent cemetery right next to an elegant catering hall were the only other exceptions and even the local mafia don's fortress castle just across the street, *home; Trump Village* and *Beach Haven,* the working-class housing-projects of clustered high-rises where my first girlfriend, the little blond-haired Leah Kirsch who I cajoled on the morning school-bus trips into giving me my first kiss, and my grade school *Droogs*, Philip Gontarsky at six or seven ("when I see naked girls my *dewjee* goes up") and David Miller the quiet, red-headed kid who wasn't afraid to smile or fight lived, Brooklyn, where the big kid sitting behind me on the station-wagon ride back from school reached over and unlocked the passenger side door I was leaning

against, opened it and I came spilling out onto the traffic of Ocean Parkway, which screeched to a fast halt as I rolled once or twice before bouncing back up, embarrassed but unharmed, the next morning dad was waiting for him at the pickup point and terrorized him for me, *home*; where I played with my neighbors, the apartment building superintendent's sons, a squad of boys around the same age that had fun playing *war* like I did, the *Poliandros*, Anthony my age and of equal rank, Jimmy the older and crazier, meaner and more violent and young Sal the little tag-along who knew his place, *Italian-Catholics*, not much of an exotic expansion for a Hebrew day-school lad like me, dressing up as superheroes on the gravel topped garage roof, a Brooklyn version of a backyard or as Roman soldiers or pirates or one of Jason's Argonauts for cardboard and aluminum foil sword fights, *home;* where my father put me in the boxing ring with a bigger, older kid one Friday night at the crowded with dads and lads basement garage turned Madison Square Garden of the *Beach Haven Boy's Club*, right after the bell getting a quick shot to the solar plexus and the wind knocked out of me with the first and only punch by the faster boy but stubbornly held my ground and pride, all I could do just to keep standing barely able to breathe, eyes fixed on the opponent, fists up circling each other to the blessed end of the one round fight, ding! *Home;* where in earnest but vain effort tried to join the local unofficial street boy's club *the Jets*, really, not exactly original in the immediate wake of *West Side Story* but authentic enough none the less, among the *made* members another elder Anthony, probably all of fourteen, either the boss or second in command to Mark, a swarthy, slick, older, musta' been fourteen or even fifteen and potentially intimidating *Beatle-booted* grease ball-looking guy they called Chic, fat Carl with the black bangs from Bedford Avenue across from the big Catholic church which caught my occasional attention, so weird it looked, we had no images of the deity at all, forbidden, the deity has no relatives other than us all, as equals, made in His image, His children, no aunts, sisters, mothers or cousins or ghosts, images of any type, totally proscribed, while theirs were vivid, complex and often kinda' spooky looking, the imposing statues of menacing beings, mostly a

suffering guy nailed on a cross they worshipped as god, and his weeping mother who they said was a *virgin*, whatever that was, like they were deliberately trying to scare people, that crazy Jimmy Poliandro kid, the super's oldest son who I witnessed giddily skip across Avenue X, like at a picnic sack race to stab another kid in the head with a pencil, another tough, little, light-haired, Italian kid named Louie, and Mark Hermann the *president*, an older boy who at fourteen they rebelled against one day (*Civilization and Its Discontents* again) and I started crying, he was another Jewish kid from my building who lived up on the top floor with his pretty, petite, brunette mother but without a father, gone MIA, no one knew where or how or why and nobody asked but he did have a big, dangerous, German Shepard named King; my aunt Dorothy, a beautiful gentile lady with her two sons, actual Boy Scouts that lived on the top floor too, and her husband, also an MIA but before he split, an executive for Hasbro, brought me new toys to try out, a rolling Yogi the Bear and a Mousketeer cap; fulfilling the test missions the Jets gave me, one after the other, each week another set of challenges: stealing candy for them from the corner store across from the Danza family supermarket, procuring a pocket knife as having one was officially needed to join, finding *bases* (club-houses and hideouts in alleys and apartment building basements and garages), scaling fire-escapes and rooftops to prove my nerve and agility, helping out during the neighborhood makeshift street carnivals of home made go-carts and cardboard table and chalk marble games, even eventually agreeing to fight one of them as another test, my choice of who on the corner house of X and the Parkway, a ring devised on the front lawn, the one with the spooky, ghostly, pale-blue and white *Madonna* statue lit up at night that was supposed to be the crucified god's mom they said, or a ghost, possibly both, it was always eerie but never clear, anyway it was clear that the property belonged to the Danzas who I knew from grocery shopping with my mom so it was okay to borrow their lawn for a neighborhood fist-fight, picking that other little Louie closest to my size with him being about eleven or twelve when I was just about nine or maybe almost ten, and though after a brief tussle was

eventually beaten earned respect for even daring to step-up and try. If you were too afraid to fight then a Brooklyn childhood's not for you especially not in *Gravesend*. Another time accompanied by a younger neighbor tag-along kid from my building, my pal and squire Neil, whose dad drove a taxi and probably owned the medallion and had a pretty mom too, Esther; watched another guy also trying to get in, probably Chic or maybe Louie having to kiss one of the local girls *Gina's* naked foot. That was the worst. Disgusting. I don't remember her being too crazy about the idea either but never-the-less she bared and presented it and he performed the foul, outdoor deed, kissing it as required in front of the quorum of club members gathered outside her apartment building's huge front lobby window to witness his obedient submission and requisite degradation then spit fast like it was poison. I wasn't gonna do that, not that they asked but even if they had would have refused instead offered to make up for it by stealing more candy or something even more daring but less disgusting. Kissing a foot, even a girl's, even a pretty girl's was out of the question, not even to be in the Jets. Girls. Home was where that discovery was made. Another building neighbor, Ina, like *Carolina*, a young single woman, a stunning dark-eyed brunette with a Brooklyn laugh who drove a dark green and blacktopped Mustang convertible, the coolest chick on Ocean Parkway and always made a big deal over me, "look how handsome and smart he is" she'd announce to my mom while looking right into my eyes with a certain special smile that couldn't quite be identified yet still hit its mark, "the girls will fall right down" and of course, there was Lisa, a very pretty light-haired and green-eyed girl, my age, maybe a little older and taller, the night when we were quite young and small and put into the same bed together while our parents were visiting. Her dad, a big guy named Neil too, it was whispered, had just been released from prison, something forgivable, was showing my folks his injured ankles from beatings by guards, anyway, that night in the bed, feeling something strange and impossible to understand, something good though, not even touching but still sensing a deeply appealing softness and warmth with a hint of moisture very nearby, like in that bed, like probably coming from her, her body somehow,

it wasn't at all clear what a girl even was back then but knew it was something significantly different from me, us, boys and seemed to have something to do with anatomy, a missing part. A kid next to me in nursery school standing at the urinal pulled down the pant's zipper and there was nothing there, she had to be directed to the stall with the throne. Was it just this kid or were there more like that? What happened? Is it bad? Where did it go? Weird but whatever, I never forgot that wondrous, mysterious, and magnetic warmth under those covers with my neighbor Lisa that night, that's home, the place where that fascinating discovery is first made. And the Jets? Every week they'd say they were gonna vote on my admission on Sunday after church and every week they'd announce the verdict, they needed more time and I needed more testing, there was another vote next week at the next meeting, etc., etc., so I stubbornly held on again. Brooklyn was *home.* On one routine bus expedition, it was around *Father's Day* the explorer de-bussed on the highway of kings, not far from grandma' and grandpa's apartment on East Thirteenth, and bought his dad a neck tie with four quarters and felt like a big man, a grown up buying a gift with his own money, another time spending a dime on a copy of the *New York Times* at the candy store across the street from school, now a grownup crossing the street by himself for the first times and reading the newspaper, showing my mom knowing she'd be proud.
Shopping trip or recon mission with each mile and minute away whatever the immediate purpose happened to be the greater mission of these round trip excursions, closing the ever-expanding circle was broadening territory. Just as important as increasing the range was paying the fare with my own money, buying a real sense of independence and freedom, challenging the unknown and gaining more confidence to take ever further adventures, as practically nothing bad ever happened. It was mostly all good. Very good. The trips were fun like nothing else, even better than make-believe sword fights with aluminum pan helmets, armor, and capes of bathroom towels. This was real. One time, though? The worst case, on a foot journey towards the end of the planet at Coney Island and the sea I got *strong-arm* robbed by two or three confused looking

black kids in an apartment building alley where they took, actually asked for my sneakers. It seemed like they were play-acting out some script themselves for the first time, robber, thief, vengeance on the white-man but never laid a hand on me or even threatened to, the boys tracked and cornered me then asked more than demanded. I thought as a white person we're obliged to feel sorry for them, my script, and gave them up, rationale being they couldn't afford shoes because they were slaves once upon a time in the South and the *KKK* still tormented them sometimes somewhere (but not in Brooklyn, at least not as far as could be determined). *Life Magazine* had a full color photo spread of hungry kids in Harlem slums today eating plaster and paint chips *now* which my parents had prominently open and displayed on the living room cocktail table suggesting it was partly our fault or at least our responsibility `cause we were white and had to atone for the *Confederacy* who were also white, even if we had exactly nothing to do with them and were actually the descendent remnants of the ancient and exiled Israelites, slaves once ourselves, who only just got to this country from the old country Mother Russia two or three generations ago, long after abolition and the Civil War, where we *yids* had our own existential trials and mass suffering, an innocent kid buying in. "White guilt," especially among first and second generation liberal Ashkenazim sets in quick, somehow we're geared for it, maybe it's our own centuries of ghetto conditioning and persecutions or if not quite guilt at least a *cattle-car* full of sympathy bordering on actual empathy with the downtrodden, our civil rights marching parents ensure it gets driven in, even when not quite guilt then genuine care deeply coded in our cultural DNA, a "light unto the nations" through the relentless pursuit of justice, ending human sacrifice, "love thy neighbor as thyself," etc., no matter which, the kind that killed Schwerner and Goodman, it's that real. Anyhow, I was still on my adventure and thought it was actually kinda' cool having a brush with an unresolved historic crisis and a brief taste of danger on the journey. Mom however wasn't too pleased about it, coming back without them, even after drawing the connection between my surrendered sneakers and the magazine pictures. Still not deterred or

scared at all `cause it was obvious that no matter what, sneakers or just socks, even penniless and barefooted, all anyone ever had to do was turn around on the same straight line set out on and head back to the starting point, so you could always go *home* again as long as there still was a home to go back to, and now there wasn't.

Home No More

It was gone, over and done; dead and buried yet painful as that was, all was not quite lost, the fat lady was still singing. Think! *Think*... What to do…? Down the block and just up the next street lived a neighborhood girl a friend I felt a weird kinda' family-like connection with, it must have been a combination of her pretty Mediterranean face, the aquiline nose, her warm, soft, deep brown eyes and gentle voice, her shy smile and her newspaper man Italian Catholic dad and school teacher Jewish mom and I trusted her, another Jennifer we called Jenny, Jenny Brande. On the surface she was just another Seventies-style *let's-wear-love-beads and bandanas and pretend-we're-hippies* chick while always just a little cooler and a lot smarter than the average RVC *preppie-hippie-Catholic* schoolgirl or *Jappie-goodie-two-shoes* type and since she was half Jewish that made us practically kin, hence taken all together there was that trusting family kind of feeling towards her, like a sister or a close cousin. Jenny had a legendary, long-haired older brother who according to local lore had either done time for a homicide, stabbing a dude in a gang fight or was a fugitive, an outlaw biker and hard-core dope fiend or something else top-of-the-line criminal, rebel, antihero type, maybe a wanted Weatherman or Hells Angel with tattoos, tattoos when they meant something – when they had to be earned, a scary man, didn't even live in the *Rock* – rode a loud, customized, *Easy Rider* style, chopped Harley. Only actually saw him once, with another biker, both tearing up Brower Avenue one afternoon, loud as roaring thunder and free as the breezy wind on their *badass* flying machines, so she had plenty of pedigree. Though we never went out boyfriend girlfriend style, I

always felt she somehow liked me, maybe even that way, but the time for that had not yet arrived. Complicated as always that stuff. Jenny threw some wild, teenage, house parties in that comfortable looking, classy, corner, ranch-style home of hers with the wide bay windows and baby grand in the living room when her parents were out and had recently asked if I and my friends would come to the next party coming up and be the bouncers. *Yeah*, *sure*, what an honor! My talents as a standup fellow recognized despite my well-deserved reputation as a young vandal, thief, and brawler, Jenny saw deeper, Kabbo wouldn't let her down. That night entrusted with *security*, almost everybody singing along to the stereo playing the chorus of Boston's huge, feel-good, sing-a-long hit *More Than A Feeling* everything was smooth and fun and cool in the packed living room filled with many of the cool kids, the high school A-listers along with the drop-outs and burnouts until just about the end of the night when someone, not us, broke a small front door window pane. That's when it was time to reveal the concealed, long, sharp steak knife, as was my previously mentioned habit when things got rough at happy-go-lucky festive social occasions like these, and use its display to menace the would-be adversaries that might have been the guilty parties, "c'mon, test me!" usually one or more of the chicken-shit, hotshot, jock A-listers, all of whom sanely backed right down and exited the scene. No more trouble after that. Luckily. Coulda' been real, real bad, playing it too often too close like that as a bottoming out and ready to give it up teenager, what with that looming date just ahead of me. Sometimes, for example one of the older, really popular *in-crowd* varsity jocks would pick a fight with me and unarmed he'd probably whoop my ass so there was reason underneath that reckless posturing. I hated bullies, picking on easy-shots, smaller, younger guys especially, but not exclusively when they targeted me. This one guy they called *Buffy* for some asinine reason, a real *alpha male* high-school hero, jock, jerkoff hated my guts, called me not *Kabbo* but "beak." Seems he was mesmerized by my allegedly prominent proboscis, I never asked, but he started antagonizing me at every *house-party* we ever found ourselves at the same place and time. Although I hated him back just as much as he

did me and never backed down it always meant the threat of a humiliating, public beating – hence Kabbo was building a case for stabbing him in the chest. Those ugly encounters on house party front lawns would usually end with one or two of his cronies pulling him off me before getting anything really damaged aside my pride, followed by me wandering off in sullen defeat with a friend or two, or depending on how much I had to drink maybe loudly cursing and threatening while still exiting in shame and rage but not much more. It wasn't Brooklyn where it more likely would have ended very badly, maybe even as bad as deadly. More people, more pressure, more consequences. The confrontations became routine, just as me and Hannibal picked on kids other kids picked on me. *What goes around eventually comes around* they say, right? Eventually, after a horrifying tragedy, coming to his family's prominent house at a main village crossroad to pay a condolence call after his younger brother, a very popular kid my age, a boy cheerleader, Bobby Horn, with whom I shared the privilege of illustrating our junior high yearbook back in ninth grade, was killed in a car accident at the end of his senior year, decapitated, right before graduation, another student in the car gone too, probably the driver, others badly injured but surviving. Just about everyone in our school showed up at one point during the traditional Irish-American wake, the threat of his menace wasn't going to stop me, and yet again he scowled at me, but that time didn't take the bait or stash a knife, no weapons at all, instead, expecting it prepared to just let it be, too tragic for anything else, the curly haired and Irish faced little guy was loved, everyone up and down the social scale stunned by the sudden, inexplicable loss. After the initial quick eye-contact registering my presence we basically ignored each other, it wasn't about Buffy or Kabbo. A year or two later, the next and last time in another town, Uniondale again, we spotted each other from across the wide lobby of a newly built trendy hotel, just outside the bar, at eye-contact he briefly nodded and I returned the same. That meant it was over, our beef, whatever may have been driving it, just bad blood from the gut, one of those things, no real issues, was somehow settled and instead of another attack, the young men moved on.

Back to Jenny's, despite the small, cracked, window pane rough spot the party was a success, a pretty good time without anyone taken away on a stretcher or police car or the house set on fire, probably not even burglarized a short time later, at least not by me. The minor property damage was part and parcel to an *open house* teenage party, no *Fondue* action that night and no other trouble to speak of, what there was kept to an anticipated minimum in part by me and my pal's visible but relaxed security presence, hence our bond of friendship strengthened, having been asked and come through for her. Back in the present, reviewing the recent ugly history from my near but far bivouac: the midnight joy-rides in my father's car, battering my mother's walls and furniture, arrests, fights, thefts, suspensions, expulsions, hospitalizations, incarcerations, the Newsday article, ripped-off drug-dealers knocking on the door, etc., it all began to make some kind of sense, unwelcome, a nice kid like me unable to go home. No huge mystery after all, so standing there I sort of got it. Other kids? Worse than me? Well, they were still loved, at home and still behaving badly, but that's not me, my life, or my family. Mine was mine, like it or not and that was that. Jenny though? She trusted and respected me, who was starving, desperate for sympathy and support, a home, even for just a night, a moment of deeply needed unconditional love and acceptance, which aside from Mom-Mom never had or felt, instead kept settling and striving for the next-best-thing to my adolescent mind, *fear* masquerading as respect, creating it with my risky and out-of-bounds behavior. What do you expect from a childhood dominated by fear, rejection, coldness and abuse – a father literally spitting "*I hate you*" in his only son's tear soaked face – physical and emotional, a generous variety of hurts shaping a crushed spirit. There were reasons violence and cruelty came so naturally to me while flirting with homicide. That all doesn't spring from a fount of tenderness, love, and compassion. Still posted at my bivouac, practically paralyzed with indecision and mild disorientation, imagining myself a mirage, a lonesome phantom vanished in the dark, now almost invisible, eventually forced myself to act. Rather than try to get back into the house again like the time before, instead the newly homeless

phantom in the moonlight headed down the block and across the avenue to hers, swallowing whatever pride still in reserve, deciding to take a chance and knock. *"When you're down and out – when you're on the streets, when evening falls so hard..."* as the great Paul Simon sang, and as Zeus decreed, with her parents conveniently away it was she who answered and understood immediately from the circumstances, what she'd heard around town and the look in my eyes that her security man was in real pain, low on options and in deep need of a bridge. Without a pause, no questions, or hesitation she opened the door to a wounded brother. Sadly but gratefully I stepped inside, accepting her compassion, a standup chick from the neighborhood now harboring another brother, this one a fugitive. Sometime later, during a bedroom chat, she bent slightly forward, wearing a billowy white peasant shirt as if to adjust something between us, revealing a brief view of her lovely lady charms captioned by the look in her eyes, a discrete and solitary moment of openness like that, maybe more, but regretfully wasn't returned by seizing it, it wasn't in me, not then, all my Eros still consumed by Sherry, too much of that pain on top of being desperately lost in thoughts and considerations about my next possible move. Circumstances dour, prospects few, hovering just over zero, it was a slow motion turning point from where the escapist, west coast dockworker fantasy seemed very far out of reach, especially to an exiled seventeen year old without a plan, or family and no money. On the one hand, Topic House seemed even a worse choice than homeless, but behind bars again, or a fugitive on the run? Paul Muny escaping the chain gang? "*I steal*…?" The park bench? Death row? A minor enrolled in another semester of Gladiator School? *Unthinkable*. Un-*fucken*-thinkable.

The next morning, after a fitful sleep, dreams filled with discordant voices crashing against each other all night in my head, the *Droogs*, the drug dealer, the girlfriend, parents and the police telling me this and that and that and this, over and over all night long, the unwanted realization arrived that the time had come for me to take a long avoided stand. Jenny made some breakfast and over coffee I slowly

came around to see exactly where my life was, the undeniable truth as it was so plainly evident, my situation couldn't be smoked or blamed or bluffed or even drunk away: it was all up to me and nobody else – there was no home or sanctuary, gone, lost if ever even was, friends could be there but not take my place or do it for me, I didn't want to but it became clear that I had to, *had to*, I had to go back. That was it. It was a must. I had to take my medicine, serve the time and maybe become a man or at least take a real step in that direction. Popping cherries, ripping off drug dealers and parking lot fistfights weren't enough; I had to do my bid, like Mickey Cleava said. No mommy or daddy, Don or PO, not even Sue Andrews or Jenny Brande could make the choice for me and they weren't going to have to live with any of its consequences, it was all only up to me. Once that monumental realization was fully clarified, that *it would be by my own hand* and that *that alone would make or break the rest of my life* starting today, beginning right now, the first, painful but necessary step was already taken. Everything was an inside job, period, just like the others were telling me without it ever registering but now it did, this time, registered and grudgingly accepted, finally. Reality. No way out. Hateful though it was, this was clearly necessary, not for the reasons Mighty-Mini-Mouse the drug maven or my PO or even Samenga asserted, but for the reasons that were mine alone, right in front of me, undeniably and exclusively mine. Here they were, this was indeed, and in fact, the final analysis, *I had to go back*. After finishing the meal, she walked me back to that front door, this time the quieter action inside, where after thanking her, hugged the girl as tightly as though she were my whole world being inexorably torn away, the last moment with my last friend from childhood. Looking deeply and gratefully into her warm, soft, smart and knowing eyes, never to be seen again, I slowly let go and turned away, setting back out the same portal we guarded so vigorously that wild party night just a short time before, then without any relief, not a knife or a joint or a dime to my name, no prayer for escape or any other better choice at all, the *splitee* left the Rock and headed out by foot on the long, solitary, sidewalk journey back to Mitchell Field, back this time on my own to do the year in

the aluminum cages with the group-think, cult family of Topic House, my new home.

Kabbo '77

Carrie just showed up one day, all smiles, giggles, boobs and car keys. We hadn't seen each other or been in contact since my last year in town before Topic House, hadn't even really thought of her since then but she was certainly a welcome sight for very sore eyes when 'round the mountain she did that day come. The girl may have called first, the memory is distant and covered over by events flowing from it, hard to remember exactly, somehow though she left word somewhere that she was in town and looking for me so I left word some place and somehow as to where I could be found. A sight for sore eyes in no doubt she would be and notice of her inquiry made for a welcome sound to my oh so lonesome ears too, while the mere thought of her in close range made for a stirring vibe south of my nineteen year old border as well. After all, she was one of my first and today her appearance meant my likely immediate, if only temporary rescue from the persistent soul starving solitude and chronic alienation plaguing me. *Temporary* was all anything was ever about back then when it was always *right now,* even planning for tomorrow was often a stretch. Since her call was recent, maybe only a day or two before getting the message the mere word of it felt like the eminent arrival of the great *Lady Salvation,* portending relief from the desperate struggle to avoid drowning in hopelessness, my empty existence so profoundly aimless and unattached. And she had a car. A mobile *companero* of the female persuasion; in place of going to college like the cliché nice, middle-class, Jewish-American girl ought, the confidently self-assured twenty-one year old miss and pre-Sherry flame was cruising the country doing the *leg-show* circuit while digging the sweet life out of her growing stable of young studs along the way of which her old flame Kabbo was apparently next on line. She paid for it all by entering herself into these leg show contests held at local barrooms where pretty ladies showed off their bare limbs under hot colored stage lights in a competition for Miss Burning Buns or something and won a cold keg of beer or a trip to

the moon or who knows? Whatever, knowing Carrie though it must have been cash for first prize `cause like she told me she was financing her cross country road trip with her winnings and knowing her in the biblical sense and seeing her in the literal sense, believed it. But I never even really noticed her legs, instead took close note of her big, firm, teenage, *pink-nippled* boobs and her great, big, white, radiant smile when we got so very well acquainted. Together with the furry, fuzzy, soft red bush that accentuated her alabaster, dimpled belly and those big, ice blue eyes and her willingness to share them with me were all that mattered in my world. In total the package was quite enough to keep my young attention, yet despite all that glowing youthful charm and beauty she never really did it for me 100%, the hair was too red, skin too white and eyes too bright and light. My preference runs to more of the darker and deep; seems warmer, so she never really sent me completely over the rainbow except maybe once or twice in Larry Krieger's house when his folks were gone and we took the liberty of indulging ourselves in their master bedroom, the kind of awkward groping under the cover of darkness teenagers go through while wondering in whispered foreground to silence: *am I in? Is this it?* Hey! What else are suburban moms' and dads' big, empty bedrooms for? Though she was no more than an early notch of conquests in my fresh, young belt I apparently really did it for her.

Her kid brother, maybe Jeff or Matt, whatever his name was, dealt good acid and strong THC, that I remember. A light-haired, bushy headed, fat-faced fuzzy dude always smiling like he knew something special was up but kept it to himself, not a fighter which meant he'd get his ass kicked if he ever got out of line with me or harbored any stupid ideas about ripping me off or in any way cutting me less than my rightful due, this guy wasn't stupid enough or petty enough to shave down hits of THC. As long as he never gave me a beef we'd never have one. Since we both knew and accepted that reality he was no threat or challenge, meaning he was okay with me and we were cool together, buyer and seller. It works that way,

everyone understands their place, so no issues and in that way and with his good drugs and straight up dealings, he did it for me.

One time, definitely not on my repeat list, I bought acid from another dude from the next town, little red pellets, *Fireball Express* they called it, yeah, from cursed Oceanside. Shoulda' known. Copped from the long, blond haired, black leather-jacketed, big-guy named Gary, the boyfriend of Sherry's other chunky, slightly cross-eyed, friend Marsha. The dude looked like a real Long Island, dangerous, Aryan biker type, or something like that with his big frame and hands, at least six feet tall with broad shoulders, square jaw and an Irish grin, but as soon as he opened his mouth the image faded, he sounded like a junior high kid trying to impress the cool crowd, exaggerating and overusing words like *heavy*, *busted*, *narc* and phrases like *I'm hip* and *get it on*. And he smiled too much for a toughguy villain. No matter, he was okay by me too, honest enough and through the girls we were connected, almost Eskimo brothers In fact, one of them, either Marsha or Ann, probably the zaftig candy-striper, tried to get with me when I was just about drunk enough to let it happen, so it's vague, and of course, she told Sherry. That was the point, that's how girls are. More importantly, Marsha's house was where *you-know-who* and me consummated a second time, not at all vague, so because of that and what follows she's impossible to forget, and of course, again, her parents' bedroom. At some sort of party there someone, likely me, accidentally discharged a small tear gas, self-defense canister they had carelessly lying around in the living room up on the fireplace mantle, the explosion loud enough to trigger a house alarm, summoning the local volunteer fire department rushing to the scene. Once they arrived and the house was evacuated, spinning lights, radios and sirens, neighbors alerted and gathered on the front lawn, in my drunken delirium punched one of them, a grown man and father of the kids' next door dead in the face. He musta' got too close and too aggressive, probably accusing me of arson so *here's some Sherry doesn't love me pain for you, pal*. A pretty good shot too, my boys later reported after dragging me away from the scene and into their car for another routine getaway,

once again enhancing my reputation as a guy not to invite to your house.

That was fun. But not as fun as your ordinary, everyday, horrifyingly bad-acid trip brought to you courtesy Gary's little red pellets, and triggered by the anxiety of an unplanned rescue mission to a next town over's barroom, Baldwin, looking for *Horsehead* who I imagined was in trouble there amid a hostile crowd of pre-Topic House, high-school, enemy A-listers. Everything was *tangerine trees and marmalade skies* before that, handful of us gathered to take the trip, the truly unforgettable, pardon the cliché but it serves so nicely, *mind-expanding* bliss of the first half of the trip, crouching comfortably on my knees, silent, motionless, noticing but not reacting to the guys scurry around me, giggling nonsense like mischievous elves and dwarves trespassing at a secret, night-time picnic, not at all certain if it was actually happening or only imaginarily but hardly mattered, didn't matter, me staring up at the dark outline of trees and endless sky from the soft and flowing, slightly moist cultivated green of a country-club golf-course on a warm summer night. Heaven and earth as one, all things unified and whole, no mistakes, no omissions, nothing left out: stars, sand, clouds, color, grass, stones, crickets, people, sky, the air and trees, sound and light, touch, time, everything, even thought itself, everything harmoniously and inextricably woven together as necessary parts of the great and perfectly unified whole, only experienced without the interfering filter of ego – true peace – within and without, hard to forget, if not the actual then the perfectly imagined. After several hours of stationary bliss, as the *trip* began to seem like it was dissipating, the most noticeable effects receding, the boys, maybe two car loads of us assembled and drove over to Baldwin headed to one of our regular watering-holes to drink our ways fully *down.* Sounded like a plan. After a quick ten minute drive, once we entered the normally familiar territory things went south. Tonight, for some odd reason, instead of the regular, local, harmless stool jockeys we expected to find, there they were, the whole *better-than-you* crowd of high-school preppy cool kids and

popular jocks packed in, filling the place with way more patrons than usual, all the Buffys and Peggys that never drank there and who hated me as much as I hated them present and accounted for, nothing perfect or whole about that, that's when the shift began, the slow but steady downward slide into where *you-don't-wanna-go*. No sooner did we enter than my friends seemed to disappear leaving me on my own among the crowd of intimidating hostiles. While not much higher than anyone's shoulder in that loathsome, preppie cluster with my long, *Aqualung* hair and father's knee length brown leather coat, there was no way to just blend in and soak up some booze, so turned around and walked right out. Easy call. Once outside again and looking to my right saw that while all my pals also left, just a few steps ahead of me, probably same reason, there was no Horse among them. He was probably in trouble in there, so instead of following them back to our cars turned around again, this time to re-enter and retrieve my missing pal, but after a quick tour of the two room pub, maneuvering among and between the menacing gathering couldn't spot him in there either, so left a second time before attracting any more unwanted attention, what with practically everyone glancing at the barroom door when they heard or saw it opening. This time, back outside again and down the block to the parking lot behind the bar, saw the two carloads of *goodtime Charlies* were also now gone, left without me. Thinking the acid trip had peaked before we even left the golf course and the unsuccessful search for Horse over, now abandoned and on my own, the next move was to get back home which was a long and far walk, but it was doable, maybe two or three straight miles and my only remaining option, so headed by foot up to Sunrise Highway, made another right towards the Rock and began to hoof. At about ten or eleven PM on a weekend summer night there's still plenty of traffic on the highway, private and commercial, trucks, cars, motorcycles, everything so walking along the shoulder with the flow of traffic every couple of seconds as a vehicle would pass its headlight would cast a collection of moving shadows onto the gravel and asphalt pavement just in front of me, growing in length then quickly bending away from the speeding headlights before disappearing

with the passing vehicle. That would not normally shake me, it's what happens like on the turnpike that time we were running away, except this time on acid, even coming down (or so it seemed) there appeared to be more shadows than nature or science would normally provide. Instead of one or maybe two depending on the number of vehicles and how close they were, there were like three or four or five or six at a time, maybe more. Whatever the number was, it wasn't right. Nope. Not right and not good. I tried to ignore the discrepancy, attributing it to the residual lysergic, but it wouldn't stop, the shadows were multiplying and a frightening thought found its way into my consciousness: *what if it doesn't stop? What if I lost my mind, and permanently?* Once that fearful idea took root it began, like the shadows to multiply. Now I could smell it, the acid, like a hospital morgue, feel it on my skin like a thin coating of death, a sickening taste of burnt plastic on my tongue. I had the wrong tongue. It was a dead man's tongue. Trying to ignore my own thoughts instead concentrated on the physical action of walking, watching but not feeling my legs, as if they were another's who wasn't otherwise present, *keep moving anyway; will yourself forward, don't believe what you're seeing or thinking, just keep moving. Go!* Eventually reaching the eastern boundary of the Rock, Long Beach Road made another right, out of the passing headlights' glare onto a quieter residential area, still the sickening taste and smell and worse, the fearful thoughts, *my mind is gone, I've lost my mind*. Step, step, step, one after the other until getting to the even quieter side streets, turned left along the tree-lined streets of my neighborhood where the road now began to rise and fall like a slowly pulsating wave, not just seeing but feeling it, slowly rolling up and down, unable to control my thoughts, and that stale stench of the mortuary. Step, step, step, and keep walking. Along that pulsating road which seemed endless, picture the black and white *Strawberry Fields* video, the other side of the mirror, the dark side, every stop sign and street light appearing over and over in the distance, as soon as I'd reach one it would appear in front of me again, same distance as before, a pulsating treadmill in the macabre land of the walking still-born, meanwhile the rolling road rising and

falling, now strewn among the twigs, leafs and pebbles the slices, as if from a delicatessen meat cutter of my parents' faces, eyes, cheeks, fragments of a nose, ears and hair and still that smell, skulls breaking up from the asphalt like *Jason and the Argonauts* Ray Harryhausen style, the dragon's teeth, feeling them rising up through the cracks of the splitting asphalt on the bottoms of my shoes, pushing at my feet. At one point, nearly overcome with fright I decided to climb up onto someone's front porch, the nearest one, just lie down, let them find me and call the cops, or an ambulance, anything, it didn't matter. The first house on my right had a big, empty front porch so up its steps to lie down on an outdoor sofa, just collapsing on it waiting to be found. Almost as soon as closing my eyes another thought hit, this one slightly less panicky and more welcome: *if you just keep walking, putting one foot in front of the other again and again, no matter what it looks like, ignore the illusions and the frightening thoughts, you will get home. Just keep walking.*

So that's what I did. Getting back onto the still waving road I proceeded to do as the idea suggested concentrating on one foot in front of the other, again and again, that simple, ignoring as much as possible the frightening illusion, the numbness and terrifying smell, and the worst fear of all; this was a *one-way trip, I'd never come down*. There were stories, rumors floating around with probably some truth to them about people taking acid and never coming back, trapped forever in a terrifying world of madness and hysteria, unable to control their minds, losing them entirely, Art Linkletter's daughter allegedly jumping out a high-rise window to her death, others tearing their own eyes out to stop the visions or staring into the sun until permanently blinded, real fear and it kept at me even once successfully returning to my house just a few blocks away after exiting the porch. Now late, well after midnight, back through the rear door and into the empty kitchen I turned on the lights and took a seat at the table where there sat a large box of Cheerios that suddenly began to breathe, expanding and contracting, nothing subtle about it. Deep, slow breaths, again and again. I didn't believe

any of this was actually real but the fact that my mind could create such vivid illusions, including taste and smell, and that I had no power over it, no control at all was the core terror of the relentless fright. Next, figured to head down to the basement which served as my bedroom at the time, shut off all the lights, take off all my clothes and hide in the bed under the covers where if it was so dark nothing could be seen the frightening images would cease and go away only to discover the trouble wasn't my eyes, it was my head from which there is only one reliable escape. Wrapping myself in blankets I headed up the stairs to the living room and then another flight to my kid sister's bedroom where I knocked. She opened the door and without a word exchanged between us she somehow understood what was going on. A teenager herself at the time the girl had sense enough to call one of those twenty-four hour drug overdose hotlines, putting me on the phone where the guy on the other end successfully calmed me down: *you have taken a drug... it is working itself through your system and it will pass, put on some of your favorite music, stay on the phone and try to relax.* With her help and by following the instructions of a trained therapist, that's what happened. Just by hearing his voice the panic began to slowly recede, someone understood, the horror smell of the mortuary passing first, then the stale taste of death followed soon after by the fading visions. But man oh man that was a trip and the moral of the story? *Don't buy acid from Gary* and n*ever, ever go on a rescue mission while tripping. Not even for a pal. Not even for Horsehead. Let it go instead. Just let it go.*

Aside from one or two micro-dosing experiments some weeks afterwards, sensing a possible rerun, that was pretty much the end of my acid days, no high, or even mind expanding illumination being worth that kind of risk, once was enough, more than enough, not sorry I did it but not doing it again either. Like the song said, the thrill was gone. By me though? For Carrie, like a strong hit of *Blotter, Window Pane* or *Sunshine* there was certainly an inspired thrill. That was easy to see even without lysergic. A couple of years before she had sewn me a pair of perfectly fit and perfectly faded

just-right blue jeans, Levi's adorned with soft, beige, suede and black leather patches, mirrored colored sparkles and pointed metallic studs surrounded by elaborately stitched pop symbols like the two finger peace sign, five pointed stars and several other assorted 70s hippie-wannabe motifs including a bicycle built for two intricately threaded into a tapestry of nameless forms and colors as was the current Elton John *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* style. Designed specifically for me, she included a heart shaped satin patch with our names stitched together in its center. They could have hung in the *Rock'n Roll Hall of Fame* had I been a rock-star style kid instead of a *burnout* druggie, a legendary badass outlaw wannabe, a rebel character of my own cause, *spite*, but that's how seriously well crafted they were so I humored the girl by wearing them once or twice when knowing she'd be around and what usually followed. The whole look was much too much color and *Ziggy Stardust* for a *down-to-earth* and roughly styled *Aqualung* loving kind of dude like me more comfortable with shoulder length unstyled, unwashed hair and the half-bleached, cut-off denim jacket, for glitter a dog leash chain around my neck sporting a chipped front tooth and the gold hoop through my left ear on top of my black-leather, work boots with the metal cleats so the heels and toes tapped when they hit the streets signifying sound and fury and beyond that, if you pushed too far, well, those boots were made for stompin' so let's just say you'd be taking your sweet chances `cause it wouldn't be for nothing and sure as damn-fuck I took mine. *You gota' problem wit dat?*

Misery Loves Company

Seeing her show up at my job and *wow* the guys at Barton's Baby Furniture Store where I got little or no respect was a bright spot in the dim, late fall chill of '77, perhaps even the only one. Those cold hearted Barton bastards wouldn't even give me *full-time* hours despite knowing how desperately they were needed – some people just won't make room if it means doing with just a little less no matter how much of everything they already have. Word had it that

the middle-aged, family man boss, old man Barton was a former high-school principal so the barely high-school diploma literate baby-furniture store crew was impressed. Not me – here was a Yid who wouldn't extend himself to help another Yid – that's how it figured, me always playing the victim or maker of victims. To be fair, when word got to him that the newly hired, nineteen year old stock clerk dropped out of community college and was trying to manage life on his own, functionally without parents or any other adult support or supervision and needed the work – he gave me all the part-time hours he could but not the full forty necessary to really hook me up with *overtime* and *unemployment* benefits, etc., which would have meant so much in so many ways just then, financially and emotionally, even maybe *spiritually* whatever the fuck that actually meant. It would have helped elevate me from feeling so low, belonging somewhere, a part of something legitimate, but without those full time hours, I really didn't – I was a hanger-on*er* who actually belonged nowhere – not even where I worked and drew an honest weekly check. The floor boss, another former extra-large sized jock that never made it, Marvin, he didn't care for me at all, but he did need someone to look down on and boss around with the casual disdain that was so important for this gray haired, overweight, muffin munching loser; not even calling me by name, just pointing: "there" "now" "you" "here" single word commands like to a dog, often accompanied by a menacing look. Of course, another guy might have told him to shove his muffins and found another place to earn a pay-stub, a full time job, so the fault was really mostly mine 'cause instead of moving on stayed there hopeful for improvement but bitter all the same, the little, jail-house, drop-out bastard conditioned to distribute blame all around except where and to it really belonged; *Kabbo,* the former home town terror, now a verified, south shore, nobody. Imagine that though, begging for full time work stacking dusty, heavy cardboard cartons of cribs and high-chairs in the dark, cavernous basement storage space of a baby furniture store for minimum wage and being turned down for it, it hardly gets more pathetic than that. At least washing dishes at thirteen years old for a catering hall at $13.86 per eight hour shift is

fit for a kid just starting out in the grown-up work world, my first job, official working papers and all, a job that the same neighborhood cop and family friend, Sergeant Walter Dahlem got for me. Yeah, another Walter, but not a clown, and incredibly enough, strings needed pulling for a young teenager's dishwashing job, later, he also secured for me job number two at the *Backstreet Steakhouse*, my tortured busboy career, staring at the clock and smoking cigarettes instead of quickly bussing tables like good busboys do, hating every second of it, where my long hair needed tucking under my stiff white shirt collar as part of the outfit and the two owners, if they weren't actual front men for glamorous gangsters they sure tried to look that way, or associates, or at least associates of associates, either way, they would have bounced my lazy ass quick and far after the first miserable shift were it not for the prestige of Sergeant Walter Dahlem of the RVCPD.

Our families, the Dahlem's and mine bonded a few years earlier over tragedy: the loss of their youngest child and only daughter, Linda, a sister to me, a dear one, same grade. When I transferred from private school to public at age thirteen, where she'd always been and was a popular, vivacious young just about teenager, knowing all the kids, popular, pretty but never in anyway snooty, she'd come to my house every morning before school, pick me up and walk with me there introducing me to everyone along the way as her neighbor and friend. Her family, *salt of the earth folks,* were the kind of neighbors you don't have any right to expect but are deeply grateful if lucky enough to ever have even once. The sergeant respected my dad, they complemented each other, a cop and a "doc" as Walter called Boris, and brought him and his practice into the PBA spotlight, where his just bought private office really took off. His two boys, Carl the younger, a year or two older than me and Steve the elder, about four or five years older were both like big brothers to us younger neighborhood kids, all American types, tough, brave, athletic, private school kids themselves, the local Catholic boy's high school *Chaminade*, same as Jerry's oldest brother Johnny. Straight kids, ROTC types, short hair, beer *yes*,

marijuana *no*, but still pretty cool guys anyway and never bullies or otherwise mean. One night a few years earlier the local boys, a lot of us, ten or twenty, teamed up, two on a bike to play bicycle tag, speeding after each other all over the lawns, sidewalks, streets, everywhere chasing one another. Seated on the butterfly handlebars of the Stingray bike with the long Easy Rider sissy-bar behind the banana seat, Steve was pedaling in hot pursuit when getting my sneakered foot caught in the front wheel spokes, thrown over forward onto my face. *Bang!* When he stopped to check, a pretty forceful throw, he was worried I might start crying or call it quits, but no, instead just shook it off, dusted myself off and got right back on, fresh bruises and all, it was a game and getting bounced on occasion was part of it so with that earned some respect from the older boy. Those were the good times, when friends are made. Another night, towards the end, my parents with Linda's at the hospital, I couldn't go, too frightened and weak, unable to face her bravely, no reason to go like that, no strength, courage or faith to share with her, instead was sent over to keep Steve company, just the two of us, finishing a bottle or two of wine together in their kitchen, staving off the abyss of despair in his eyes for several hours. And their pretty mom? Catholic cross-wearing, church-going Emma with the big eyes and Brooklyn accent? All but crushed by the cruelty of fate and the unanswerable, a nightmare you can't wakeup from, *where was Jesus? Why, Jesus, why?* Jews have no answers either, certainly I didn't. The devastating, unfathomable loss, my words won't suffice and memory blocks or fails, so let's quit it right there, except to say Linda never called me *Kabbo,* not even Robert, Linda called me *Bobby*. G-d rest Linda Dahlem's eternal soul.

Back in Hempstead, at already nineteen, downstairs in the vast underground storage space Barton's was more pathetic than either of them put together. Bald Sid was the touchup repairman and the crypt down there was his dark and dusty domain, inspecting stock before delivery for scratches and dents in the veneers, skilled at replacing or disguising them with his stains, glues and brushes. The little ferret

of an older guy listened to his AM transistor radio, sports talk while helpfully working on teaching me his trade; he meant well while I tried to play along as though I wouldn't rather be panhandling change on the streets than earning my life living like that. Pathetic with a capital *P* it seemed. Anyway and whatever, even as I tried to show interest, even showing up on time after almost an hour and a half bus ride each morning from Long Beach, buying my coffee and Danish at the same deli the other Bartonites did, they just wouldn't let me fully on board. A couple of the younger guys there were all right, full-timers around my age, another stock clerk and a delivery guy, former high-school athletes and frat boys who already seemed to have arrived at the *nowhere* they settled for in life and would probably be content to remain at 'til death made them part. Those two half-cool guys actually had some affection, sympathy and respect for me, seeing as I wasn't still at home like they both were with mommy and daddy and Uncle Joe and Aunt Sadie, etc., or here tolerating *fuckface* Marvin out of convenience but actually trying to make ends meet for myself by myself, unusual for a middle-class suburban white kid in those days, even though we're talkin' the otherwise wild Seventies. One of'm, the former high school football star now humble playpen delivery man took us on a beer drenched, late fall overnight, weekend, road-trip upstate in his classy lookin' sports car, not sure the model but it was almost surely a silver-gray, low-key cool lookin' two-door Oldsmobile with some kinda' mega-motor, lota' horse power and a quiet, smooth, comfortable ride, wherein we drank by the case, all we could, wore out the eight-track, drove as far as time allowed all the while seated, drunk and punching each others shoulders almost as hard as we could almost the entire trip. Boys will be boys and it was a blast. No accidents or tickets, just sore shoulders and hangovers. All in all though, life at Barton's was that of a first class chump in a loser's purgatory where grown men spent their best days selling *newly-weds* baby furniture. Baby furniture. Not tanks or machine guns, precious watches or gems, or high-tech medical equipment or expensive real estate, something you could take pride in knowing about and having access to but baby furniture. Goo-goo ga-ga, chin dribble on your sleeves

and diaper smells in your nose, talk about pathetic; at least my life was still young with room to grow and places to go despite not having any serious idea as to where or how or until now even *when* while *soon* was the hope. But as soon as they got a load of the blue-eyed, redhead making her grand entrance one afternoon lookin' like a centerfold from a biker magazine and asking for me suddenly the part time, butt grubbing runt of a stock clerk Kabakoff stood a bit taller and a lot more impressive. Call it the *Carrie Weber* effect, bestower unto me of an amazing associated grace and they hadn't even seen those prize winning legs, she just stunned 'm with those prominent, firm, ivory-white cleavaged boobs, the long red-orange hair framing that button-nosed angelic face, the blue-eyes and her shock-white smile. And again and on top of all that, worth saying twice, stunning more than anything else about her was the fact that she was asking for *me.*

The net of that sudden eruption of unexpected interest and appreciation was not to be measured in more of the much needed *hours* but rather in the rapid increase of friendly smiles and respectful nods from the crib salesmen which by itself was a welcome change there, even Marvin lightened up a little, the place where I sank low enough to start smoking cigarettes again, OPs mostly, after proudly having quit just six weeks before thinking to go athletic, but here? In this melting pot of chicken-shit mediocrity, just a few short weeks off my pushups and jogging peak, shortly after sprinting home from watching *Rocky* go the distance on the big screen was now sinking back down to the shamefully low level of my current environment, an environment in desperation having placed myself in, survival mode at Barton's of Hempstead, the baby furniture store. They musta' had a classified add in the *Help Wanted* section of the college newspaper or an index card notice on its bulletin board. Just out of the one-year stint in a county-run, inpatient drug rehab cult it seemed to me that any place that would hire me was good enough to work at and as far as the relapse into tobacco addiction? That was a gradual decline. At first, I kidded myself and only smoked the occasional filthy butts from the

ashtrays, a hit or two or three, a quick free nicotine rush to help get through the low paid boredom and routine humiliation that was the stock clerk's lot at the bassinette and baby-carriage Mecca of Nassau County, then on to grubbing full cigarette from nail biting, bitter Sal, the wiry, dark-haired cat, always stressed, just divorced baby stroller salesman before ultimately collapsing into buying full packs of my own. Finished again at nineteen, only a few months out of *Topic House* from where I emerged feeling strong and confident for seeing the entire sentence through, now broken again, dropping out after midterms, halfway through the first semester in community college, the same one I stared out to from inside *the property* fence, where I had been doing well, straight *A*s, a romantic overnight canoe trip down the Delaware with the intramural sports club, and a fine lass with a fine ass to sleep next to and get busy with, living at home with mom who generously bought me a wardrobe and a brand new moped to start my new and improved life with, all this going well until throwing another shit-fit inspired by the familiar, intolerable, coldness and rejection, specifically mom's highly conditional support, to wit *if I didn't return for the second semester and chose to work full time instead* (after suggesting I might so choose) *she'd throw me out,* to wit I replied with my usual candor and aplomb by smashing furniture and hurling her car keys through the living-room sheetrock wall. That ugly event marks the final moments of the ill-fated, short-lived return home after my Topic House sojourn. Solo now again, carefully dispensing my hard-earned pennies as I selected from the half smoked butts in the ashtrays, weighing their value against the purchase price of a fresh new pack and the state of my health. Smiles and knowing nods at Barton's weren't going to the bank so it was painfully clear that for me then, if not before, newly nearly homeless, on the narrow edge, still cold but no longer so terminally alone that *outa' here* with Carrie was as good a bet as any currently available for wager `cause she was no doubt *right here* and *right now* my one and only certain jean stitching *ticket-to-ride.*

"The West is the best – get here – we'll do the rest." (Jim Morrison)

She said she was heading out to visit her folks in Arizona and it just happened that I was heading west too, a bit further though to California – vaguely following the great Lizard King's haunted echo and promise, some unspecified notion about the west being *the best* and where I'd never been before much past the Delaware. For now Arizona was close enough, nearer to the Pacific and far enough from the dark, desperate, freeze of Long Beach and the Atlantic. Thus it seemed fate would have it that we were paired off again and so commenced planning the grand getaway. To her credit she was quite frank with me about the intimate details of her travel plans, specifically that she'd be stopping in various, designated cities along the way to win contests and visit the boyfriends she held in reserve in them and was welcome as long as the ride didn't get too bumpy for me (my ego) or slow for my itinerary. "Sure, let's do it," smirking inside, like I gave a sacred snort about her redheaded ass like that, like I'd be *jealous* or something? Right, *sure, born to be wild, that's me,* that's us, so *let's roll!* We'd split the gas, tolls and beer and knew I'd drink more beer than that car'd drink in gas so cool was cool and away we planned to ride.

Naturally, before we left there was some unfinished business to attend, specifically, seeing my father and his mother grandma' Bessie one last time and while at it hitting them up for some travel dough. For sure they'd be glad to be rid of me since to them sonny-boy was nothing but trouble and their familial love was negligible, thin and highly conditional from the start, so a little road cash would be no big hassle – they'd give me at least enough to buy the bus ticket to LA, that is to get me outa' town and in addition to that little mini-family reunion, just before we split, another important point of closure to secure, I'd have to make a final house call to the folks at that bungalow we kinda' shared in good `ol Long Beach, my dependable refuge from the *Center Rock*. Now, closing that account was gonna be much less lovey-dovey.

Before getting to the Long Beach part, the part about the bungalow bastards, permit me to report a few things about Bessie, Eugene, and

Boris Julius. Bessie and Eugene were my father's parents, and if I have five or six memories of them in total, well, that's a lot `cause only three or four of'm come to mind and even they're vague, despite that they helped shape my world in some profound ways, so here we go. It's doubtful I'd seen grandma' Bessie more than three times after my bar-mitzvah and grandpa' Eugene was gone long before, not to be counted among the sentient and above ground since '69. This time before heading west was most likely going to be, almost certainly the last time I'd ever see aristocratic and distant old grandma' Bessie again and at some level we all must'a sensed it reflected by the forced smiles and tepid warmth, the formal humorless and somber tone like the kid was an unwanted forced adoption coming to an end. *Grandpa' Eugene* though? He was a much warmer and generous soul and quite a resourceful fellow in his own right, a successful, brave, smart and hard working immigrant American who was forced to spend a year at hard labor in the Russian *gulag* after the revolution as the price he had to pay the Kommisars for his exit pass from the now *USSR.* Coming to the States to secure his freedom and bride – Bessie Fried, a very determined, bright and good looking, little lady herself already here working in a garment-sweatshop somewhere in Kansas of all places – his mission to claim her then begin making his way up the pyramid of needs toward the American dream, the opportunity to engage a dignified life in quest of maximum self-actualization succeeded at both. Together they had only a single child, so both my parents were *only children*, peripheral aunts, uncles and cousins on both sides evaporated into a vague history well before the final reunion, families apparently were less necessary here than in the old country, the binds that tied them turned out more restrictive, less elastic than supportive in the *land of the free* it seemed. Whatever. I was on my own. That was clear. Grandma' Bessie wore a smile that said: *I'm not fully here so don't expect very much and you won't be very disappointed,* got it from the start so never did. For example when you come to grandma's house and she has nothing kids like to eat, no snacks or treats, the picture takes rough shape from details like that. She must have learned her ways dodging pogroms while

dealing with the murderous Cossacks and her fellow *shtetl* Yids, a sort of defense meant to keep folks at arm's length without antagonizing them – yet she still wore that not-quite-open smile here in America and with her only grandson, probably her son too. I learned my own tricks to keep distance with, like the earring, cut-offs and boot cleats, so, there was virtually no authentic closeness, we were strangers who happened to be related playing our respective roles, half-heartedly going through the motions. Grandpa', a much more accessible cat loved cold borscht and sour cream with buttered fresh pumpernickel, had his old fashioned seltzer bottles delivered by the case, and led the best, traditional seder I can ever remember. Unlike his grandson the man was good with numbers and became not only an accountant but also a CPA. The guy that came here without a word of English put learning the language on his *right now* list, first up, the math teacher in the old country painted houses in Brooklyn by day, working for a cousin already here and went to school at night, climbing his way up the ladder to where before putting his pencil down for the final time at age sixty-nine did well enough to have his own small firm with several bean counters working for him, owning a couple of small parking garages, putting his son through NYU and U of P Optometry and sending his grandkids to private schools and summer sleep-away camps, *the American dream*. His smile was for real, kids can always tell. Whenever we went to visit even before their apartment door ever opened, at the first knock I'd hear his deep, slow, staccato, cough-like laughter from inside then leap through the open the door into his embrace absorbing all the radiant joy he'd feel as he sat me on his lap and listened to me count in Hebrew, *achad, shtayim, shalosh*, a gift he bought and paid for, for himself, an element of the dream, the tribe would endure and his grandson proudly carries that torch to this day.

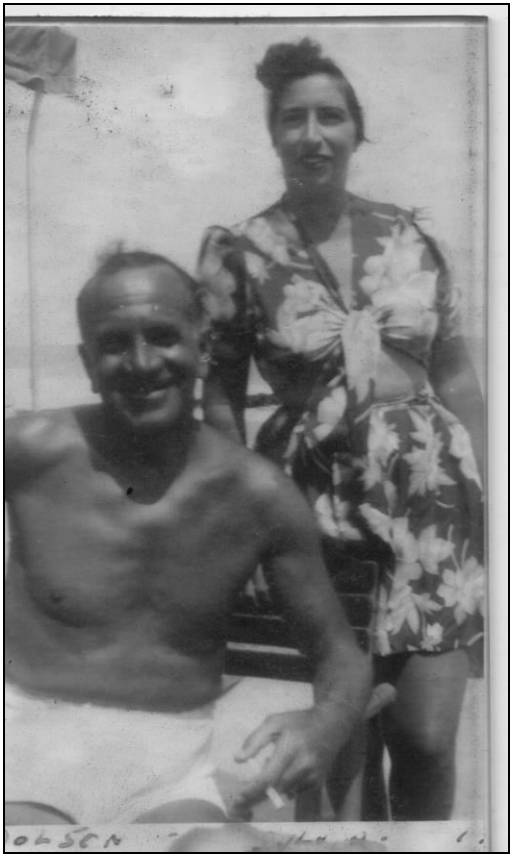
After his passing and my parents' divorce lead to the functional disintegration of the entire *daddy-o's* side of the family my mother's mother, *Sylvia* the great American-born-Philadelphian, a Yiddish speaking *flapper* (*mi'fa dana glid'l*) girl of the legendary Lindell

dynasty stepped in as the capstone holding the remnants of family together. *Mom-Mom* as we called her, came to her daughter my mother Miriam's rescue, now single without a college education or carrier to support us, she let Boris go, financial strings included, just like her ma' did Joey, just to get free of him. Sylvia was my only kin, besides briefly Grandpa' Eugene and even more briefly my other grandpa' and her hubby, mom's dad, the illusive entrepreneur and short-cutter *Joey Jamison* (Mom-Mom didn't put up with nonsense, his dubious business practices, ditched him back in the early 60s when divorce was rare and bold) to ever give me full-on, sustained and unqualified love. If not for her I'd be clueless on that count, would have no experience of real love, the kind you can't turn on and off, and a few other priceless ideals like *books are your best friends*, and *if you love what you do you'll never work a day in your life*. Amen to all that. Despite his alleged business shenanigans, Joey was a pretty cool dude with a warm, genuine smile of his own. One of twelve kids from our first family native generation, like Sylvia born in Philadelphia but to the legendary Jamison clan of professionals, business owners and a well-known bookie (no borscht and pumpernickel for them, all hamburgers, hot dogs and beer) he started teaching me to box and throw a football during that short-lived, grampa' grandson love-train. During his one visit to Brooklyn, a stop on the way to parts unknown somewhere down Costa Rica way with his new wife Lucille, a foxy, *zaftig* mama as memory serves, a blond haired gentile of the Episcopalian genus, and her young son Christopher, another blue-eyed, blond haired kid who got dragged around by his parents' chaos, he brought one for me, a white one, a cool one, a white football that fit my small hands just right so it wasn't for nothin' that I recall his funny boxing lessons, thumbing his nose with an imaginary glove as he rocked back and forth eye-balling me predator style and the joy it brought us, the instance of love. Worth repeating though, Mom-Mom, the wild lady who laughed and made everyone else around her laugh too, the real source of confidence and joy was the only kin to ever give me the enduring, totally unconditional love every kid needs to grow straight and right. Thank G-d for her, every day, without who

my father's dire curse and ominous and predictions would very likely have already manifest; Mom-Mom, who listened to every word I ever said, insisted on waiting on hand and foot, literally, stretching my limbs while still in bed after I woke, a five year old watching Saturday morning cartoons gets up to retrieve yet another glass of orange juice from the kitchen only to have her intervene, exasperated but not annoyed, "*ask me! It ain't exactly scalin' the Alps!*" always bringing gifts and my favorite treats on her visits allegedly sent by her alter ego, "the Blue Fairy" and later took me to see *Easy Rider* at just eleven years old though the film was rated *R*, a big deal, letting me learn to drive on her little "pindik" of a car, bought me the *White Album* on my tenth birthday, always with her nighttime scotch on the rocks and Pall Malls she called "medicine," let me smoke cigarettes and drink beer in her presence after my bar-mitzvah, took me to the great Broadway musicals on holidays, *Man of La Mancha* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, a dinner and a night at the *Algonquin* before the shows, amazed and made me laugh by yelling "*RAPE!!!*" outside the car window driving around in downtown Philly to show me how no one cared (no one did). People barely looked. Without her limitless adoration and the mutual affection we shared nothing would have worked out right, it would have been a life fueled entirely by spite and ugly rage, and probably a brief one. Shortly after her divorce she moved to Brooklyn from Philly and later, after her daughter's to the cursed Rock where she helped support my mother and sister while Mom took to book, becoming a successful interior designer, and where she lived out the rest of her confident and fun-loving life, loving me through to her last breath. G-d rest her eternal soul.

Countessa Bessie though? She went the other way and disappeared into the tree lined, asphalt and brick, glass and concrete shadows of Midwood Brooklyn along with her unsteady OD son who a short time later went himself permanently and totally AWOL from his kids – as if he had a pass to drop everything and run, damage done, both me and my kid sister *Karen Lee* left in the wreckage of a marriage made in hell. *Thanks Dad*. Whatever. They weren't

missed, neither of them. So, now on the eve of my cross-country sojourn, the prodigal grandson was here to say *goodbye* with a hand out and a phony little smile of his own. As if they had to do something, handed me a big one hundred dollar bill and a phone number, returning the same *phony-as-mine* smile back all wrapped up in a neat bow of "*good luck and don't forget to write!*" (and not come back) dismissals and with that another empty case in my life shut, closed and nearly forgotten. *Seeeeeeya'....*



Sylvia Lindell, c. 1935 with Al Jolson

Another Fond Farewell

Those petty, selfish clowns in Long Beach? They really put me down, hurt me when I was so nearly helpless and open to pain, probing for weaknesses and sticking me as they were able with sharp little pins, cruel, selfish, and careless. A month or two of that treatment qualified them for a generous helping of *payback:* a parting shot. I'd trash the place, maybe rob it too, come in the afternoon when they were all out and it was empty – make'm feel a little of what they made me feel, as per my regular, only worse if possible. The keys were still my possession 'cause for once kept my mouth shut and never said a word about splitting, so, with bags packed and Carrie just outside, getaway car engine running, let myself in to quickly but fully settle that miserable account. This was gonna be ugly. Imagine, asking me for "security" when they had me sleeping in half a cold porch, shared with another guy across from me in October now November, our "rooms" divided by a hanging bed sheet tacked up to the ceiling while they were warm inside and were friends and had laughs and smoked pot, cooked for each other and never even thought to share; leaving scribbled notes taped to my dresser warning that without a *security deposit* handed over quickly I'd be told to leave. Evicted. Out on the streets. In the cold. Nobody ever said anything about *security* before I moved in or when I moved in so why now, weeks later and already there, paying weekly rent with cash, in full and on time, invested? I'd never even heard of it, *security*, thought it was a scam, a shakedown, yeah, they were trying to hustle me and it wasn't gonna work. It's not exactly clear where I even met up with these sorry jerkoffs – probably another notice on the same bulletin board at the Nassau Community College, *roommates wanted*, as with the furniture store, which I must've picked up, made contact and was immediately welcomed in by peers – young people just out on their own and perhaps away from *mommy and daddy* the first time too. No one said anything or asked for *security* – they just wanted a week's rent in advance which I forked over in cash and then moved my self in, all two suitcases of my worldly possessions, fast and easy. Among them was the

instigator, a slim, soft-spoken, backstabber dude named Peter, Massio I think, an Italian sounding name – the lease on the three-bedroom bungalow in Long Beach's blue-collar West End was in his name. There he lived rent-free by renting out the other two bedrooms to his assorted cronies, among them his heavier, potbellied and pot-addicted, school-bus driving cousin. This stoned out, less appealing Ralph Kramden character whose name escapes me would become visibly apoplectic with enthusiasm as he puffed away at the fat joints he rolled while describing and pantomiming the bouncing joys of clutching, throttling and steering a five speed, yellow, school-bus through suburban side streets. You would have thought by watching his ecstatic reenactments that he was a champion broncobuster at the Indie 500 for all the intensity and stoned-out vigor he displayed about slowly making his way through narrow roadways and Stop signs on routine tours of a local public school district. It was hilarious, not only the physical reenacting but he'd call out the plays too: "second, up shift to third, up shift! Now! Release clutch, release brake, signal! Turn left thirty degrees, steady, now gas! Pedal! Hit the pedal! Gas!" in a pathetic kind of way, puffing away, billows of thick, white smoke punctuating that unlikely form of performance art and exhibitionism. Despite the smoke the man sure found his calling, that was clear. Another housemate, a young college-age girl waitressing part-time must have jabbed me once or twice or thrice too hard too with snide comments and condescension 'cause I trashed her room first. Those three, and the other guy on the porch in front of the house, were the whole happy, crappy family I lived with for a couple of miserable months on that narrow, windswept street between the bay and the ocean. The porch mate? The guy on the other side of the hanging bed sheet, he was a little bit older and a modicum more worldly than me – a young, tall and lanky Abe Lincoln lookin' fuck who taught me a thing or two about meditation – he said it was like slowly drawing a sky full of chaotic clouds together and pulling them into a single, straight, orderly line by silently repeating a *mantra* – a meaningless two-syllable word, a sound meant solely as a means of anchoring your mind's ears – maybe *Sanskrit* – maybe mumbo-

jumbo, doesn't matter, but I appreciated him sharing the insight, so his stuff wasn't messed with when I wreaked holy havoc on rest of that icy-cold clan of heartless insiders. The anger came from the fact that now, all of a sudden, while knowing my situation at that point in life from the start, the desperate spot, and accepting my first rent payments up front and my regular ones thereafter, week after week, they were all-of-a sudden getting technical about real-estate practices while I couldn't even get full time hours at work lest those cheap, secure Barton's bastards have to treat me like an equal and put me fully on board. Pins. Massio wanted *security*. As it turned out he would have had it had he asked me for it upfront and not stabbed at me with it from behind after the fact, already moved in, dependent, I woulda' put it up right then if he had, *security*. I'd fix'm now though that I'm no longer so desperately in need of a bed on a half a cold porch to sleep on. *SMASH!* The lamp*, crack!* The mirror. Knock it off the wall. Anybody want a camera? Smashin' it – some costume jewelry? Hurling it – a little makeup? Dumping it – a fancy bottle of Amaretto? Takin' it – that drawer? Open and fling, that one too – open and fling, repeat, again and again, yeah, I still had the key and as far as *security?* Well, now they had a reason for it where as before they didn't, at least not from me. *Ask and yee shall receive*. Now, it was too late. Again, they would never have needed it if they hadn't jabbed at me with it again and again when I was so down and in most need of friendship and support, a little slack and trust, a little kindness, just a little. So they reaped what they sowed. Nice rug, pull it up and flip it over, plants, furniture and all, a failed magician's trick for them to uncover. Pricks, now they'd come home to a *goodbye* note from me everyone could read all over their carpeted warm floors! No need for Scotch tape here. Let's see the happy, stoned-out, bus-driver pantomime this action. I may have even pissed on the living room rug, not sure, but could have, should have, not sure, but probably. Who knows? Anyhow, I'd be drunk and laughing it up with Carrie blasting Golden Earring's *Radar Love* somewhere crossing country on the interstate, throwing empties from the half-open car window and heading west when the drama I left'm took center stage in their sad, cold and lonely bungalow

where after inviting me in made me the outsider. Fuck them and their food, pot and friendship. Here's a lesson in sharing for ya' you greedy bastards, maybe not a fancy, Sanskrit mantra but definitely one that makes its point so *here!* Have some of my pain, delighted to share, plenty to go around, you *smug-sorry assholes!*

Including after the additional, obligatory, drunken *teenagers trashing a hotel room* event a night or two earlier, like we heard the rock stars did, grinding broken liquor bottle glass and cigarette butts into the carpeted floor, I'd done enough damage to feel sated and ready for the road. That wretched farewell party was attended by the usual crew of *Droogs* and *me go to parties* and *good time Charleys*, Jimmy, Scar, probably Hannibal and Horsehead, maybe Fondue too, held at the glorious Hempstead Motor Inn above the underground bowling alley on the turnpike, a bleaker and more dismal send off would be hard to imagine, the hilarity of *Crack-of-a-Woman's Ass Cheese* insertions diminishing, but there we were, at teenagehood's end, with a gagging whimper, and that's all there really was to it. After those two final visits, to grandma' and the bungalow, it was over and out – into Carrie's waiting, engine running, warm and ready ride I grabbed my suitcases, slammed shut that cold, front, bungalow door hard enough to hear a loud crack, probably shattering a window pane or two, tossed the key into the trash can, and with that the Massio account was now officially closed. Goodbye New York, goodbye winter, goodbye Barton's and *seeeeeeya'* to Long Beach, Oceanside, Rockville Fucking Center and everybody else who never even deserved the spit wasted on'm. Turning to Carrie, I then delivered the words and the words were: *pedal, gas, go* and *now!*

"*All we are is dust in the wind...*" (Kerry Livgren)

The cold, November night on Interstate 80 flew swiftly by us as we sped along west into the dark of the inland highway. I'd never been further west than Philly before so it was all new for me – newness,

which I have a real fondness for, the novelty of first-time travel on the road, near or far, east or west, hardly matters if it's new. Fueled by John Barleycorn and a drunk's false optimism, the passenger riding shotgun "*tripped the night fantastic*" on Amaretto and Budweiser while toking on Newports and digging the bluesy electric guitar riffs of Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs*. Carrie was pleasant but distant, it musta' began dawning on her somewhere west of the Hudson but east of the Delaware that the romantic memory she had of the handsome, swaggering, high-school renegade who she put her heart into a pair of lovingly embroidered jeans for was steadily morphing into a pathetically disaffected, solipsistic, vengeful, and therefore no-longer quite so handsome, drunken drifter. A cheap glibness accompanied my every comment, what I would do out in LA, join the merchant marines, see the world, write a book, punctuating my reverie and self-absorbed, unsolicited monologues with empty beer cans thrown through the slightly open glass of the frosty car window. Every toss sucked some of the warm air out of our ride and into the fleeting New Jersey night, along with any of the remaining personal warmth we might have ever shared again, throwing away discarded pieces of my past, my broken self littering the ever lengthening road behind us. I didn't care, if we got a ticket it'd be on her, she was driving and it was her car. That was what most likely turned her off more than anything else. I really didn't care, not about her, not about me, not about nothin' and I let her see that too, and about *us*? Neither by then really did she, the dwindling smiles and giggles now gone, having already made it clear that she brought along for the ride, literally and figuratively, her guy between guys, period, whose only remaining value was his cash contribution to the gas and tolls fund. We may have done it once or twice again before we left New York, probably, but I don't even actually remember `cause as reported she only just about turned me on like that, while the pain of Sherry still very much plagued me, an aching emptiness always simmering just beneath my conscious thoughts. I just wanted to have another beer, another butt, hear another tune, get away from NY and soon I'd just want to get away from Carrie too.

First stop, *Shaker Heights*, Ohio, *look at this!* Arriving late at a modern mansion just outside Cleveland – impressed not by the new, big house so much but by how much road we actually covered that day, considering that we left Long Beach in the morning and made it three states away before the next dawn. Cool. Now we're talkin', now it felt better, grooving, *escape*, first stepping over the familiar Hudson, breaking free of New York, across the flat quiet of northern Jersey on 80 then over the distant Delaware, through the Poconos and Alleghenies – then again reaching the flat coldness under the bright, late autumn stars of *the buckeye state* to here, Shaker Heights, another hoity-toity neighborhood like Canterbury but this one in the unfamiliar suburbs of another city in another state – almost an exotic *no man's land*, might as well have been *Zanzibar* or the *Outer Limits*. There in the pitch of night we were welcomed at the front gate by her expectant host, another old flame that greeted me cordially then quickly showed the *third-wheel* to a guest bedroom where to crash for the night. *Could'a been worse* I felt at first, parked within the quiet, paneled, quilted comfort of my bachelor's quarters but soon after settling my feelings changed having now had my first taste, decided that it really wasn't so cool after all, not diggin' it so much, feeling just about tolerated, not actually wanted and aside from a lift outa' town was ambivalent about the trip with her right from the gate. I didn't need her and she didn't need me. The big getaway was done, so figured to tell Carrie come the morning to cancel my shotgun reservation and instead just drop me off at the closest bus terminal, ready as I'd ever be it'd be a *solo* sojourn for the rest of the trip west to whatever destiny waited out there, turns out this *tagalong-fuckalong* routine wasn't gonna cut it after all, not my speed, *too slow,* but thanks anyway. Even at nineteen I wasn't always that horny and even when I was – not desperate like that for her, icy blue eyes don't really work for me, not now anyway and for sure I'd have my share either way so was better off taking my chances on a bus with strangers traipsing cross-country one step above hobo than playing traveling stable boy for the ol' red-headed, *dick-happy*, *leg-show* pro. For me it was always about adventure, discovery and this angle felt spent. The big

adventure was ignited by the takeoff, the breakout, always is, stepping up on to that big, green Coney Island Avenue bus, the heavy lifting already done, outa' New York we already crossed two rivers and two mountain ranges. Came morning with the announcement made, truth be told it was met without a shred of even token resistance, she musta' felt the same exact way and so without further fuss was quickly delivered to the glittering decay of the downtown Cleveland bus terminal, bought my ticket to LA moving on never to see the jean stitching, blue eyed, playgirl or her fat-faced, acid peddling, bushy haired kid brother again. As we say in Gravesend, *c'est la vie* and that was all she wrote.

A Greyhound takes about four to five long days and even longer nights to get to Los Angeles from Cleveland, a long-ass indirect haul especially without any beer, Amaretto or Robin Trower to keep comfortable with. On the plus side, because the rout isn't designed as a straight line you do get to see a lot of the country, at least from the fast flying, sterile vantage of the interstate cluttered with hideous junk food joints, truck stops and neon advertising infecting the otherwise impressive landscape like a bad rash over clear skin that only worsens over time. And speaking of time, the trip does take some, meaning lots of empty hours and days and nights staring out the windows while avoiding eye contact with the captive crowd. The ride seems to never end except when you don't want it to, like when you finally manage to fall into a state of exhausted half-sleep despite the long miles of bumpy road, neck cramps, the annoying mechanical sounds of a grinding engine, transmission, and air brakes, the narrow stiff seats with hard metal arm rests, the toxic odor of cheap cleaning fluids, and finally the regular and persistent stop and go traffic of assorted riding companions boarding and exiting, fellow elite Greyhounders. Yeah, as soon as you begin to actually doze they kick everyone off for a pit-stop. It's a steady, low intensity torture. Add to that the stops seem to occur with much less frequency when you want or need them like to piss, stretch, eat, move or just get out and breathe for a minute. The ol' gray dog just rolls and rolls along the fruited planes east of the Rockies, night and

day through the regular layovers of driver changes and fumigation needs of the aluminum behemoth. Not only the eyesores of Chevrons and Arbys to ruin the view but worse still and impossible to miss was the fact that bus depots somehow almost always seem to end up in the most godforsaken parts of town. *Which comes first?* I wondered, do the planners deliberately look for the dingiest, dankest and saddest corners of town to build their terminals in or do they get built and then grow fetid mold and depressing decay once they've been planted and around for a while? De-bussing periodically, taking in the surroundings, the young sojourner imagined himself a bystander in purgatory playing poorly his hand – looking for the quick relief of a beer, cold or warm, bottle or can, but whatever the `cause and the effect, chicken or egg, it must all happen under cover of darkness, the decay, but I will report, whatever the sociological explanation may or may not be, outside of Gladiator School, the central bus terminal in Kansas City is possibly the meanest, ugliest, nastiest place I've ever had the misfortune to spend an hour and a half in at 3 AM. Well, not actually, really, on only slightly deeper reflection I'd been in worse places, but not too many outside the Monkey House. At just fifteen, the noble street savage spent three horrendous nights and three sorrowful days in the *Kingston Town*, Jamaican police lockup dungeon, a *mace in my face* place for *ganja* possession, a hidden, fat, Jamaican-style nickel-bag slipping through my pant's leg at exactly the wrong moment – that was by far the grand horror prize winner of them all – hands down (another tale, another time) – a *no choice* place – but fewer if any by choice as this one was, and it certainly left a vivid and ugly impression on my open imagination.

The Kansas City bus terminal, a hollow, antiseptic, neon lit and over exposed transport hub, not a cozy nook or cranny to be found anywhere, smelled of ammonia and stale urine, peopled by the occasional riffraff one expects to see loitering in the middle of the night in a rundown downtown bus station, vagrants and petty crooks searching out opportunities among travelers and each other while avoiding the cops and the casual attention of graveyard shift

employees. This wasn't America the beautiful under spacious skies and purple mountains. There we were though, unboarded with whoever else traveled that rout by night in my New York City black, leather jacket, deer skin suede cap, sporting my neatly trimmed 70s goatee, waiting for the sanitation brigade to fumigate our cacophonous coach, not sure if I was supposed to be more scared, excited, sad or just plain lost and confused so it was all of that on top of plenty lonely too, mostly that, no confusion there. Nothing edgy happened though, at least not outside my mind, no mugging or flooding or natural or unnatural disasters to tell of, just being conscious there, as lost and completely alone in the dead cold of the midwestern night as anyone ever could be were enough of a disaster. Most nineteen year olds woulda' been home with loved ones, somewhere they belonged, but I had none – home was where ever I happened to be – such that it was – belonging here for tonight in this godforsaken purgatory. *They oughta' nuke the place. Maybe not even clear it first.* Mangled junk food and candy wrappers, empty pint bottles of cheap wine, crushed cigarette packs and soda cans crowding the lids of the over flowing garbage bins on top of newspaper shreds and sticky looking, rancid, indefinable garbage, the vomit smell, the empty glare, the hollow echoes of strange footsteps ricocheting from somewhere to nowhere and back again lost in time, backwards through narrow hallway tunnels that lead again to and from no place to nowhere. An anonymous, androgynous, mechanical voice announces a disinterested message over the loudspeaker: "tickets… boarding… gate five *Palukaville Junction*…. you are fucked… you are alone… no one cares…" I hardly bother to listen, I watch. Neon cloaked, dust covered convicts, a solitary well pressed young sailor in dress whites guards his sea bag, a pair of cheap looking defeated prostitutes, smudged make up and sloppy clothes, destitute runaways of all ages, colors and sexes, whole families of American gypsies clinging together as they make their way down the halls of emptiness, tired and sketchy looking cops with seventies style sideburns patched beneath their blue brims glaring at an imitation, TV headed, make-believe drug dealing vagrant tucked under a cheap, purple *Super Fly* fedora with

a battered ostrich quill talking out loud to no one visible, the in and out of lost souls scattered scant amid the slick seat isles, robot vending machines and graffiti scarred pay toilet stall doors, ten cents a piss – twenty-five a shit, no change available, fuck you. And those were just the local artifacts that could be seen. *Just imagine* I wondered, who or what might be lurking unseen in the darkened verandas and adjacent vestibule shadows waiting for an opportunity to do mischief to a dozing denizen or fellow creep who dropped their guard or bothered him for "*security*." And mischief would be done, maybe even *criminal mischief*. I'd be awake and ready 'til we got back on board, me and my gathered essentials entombed by the smell of engine exhaust and the ammonia jolt of industrial cleaning fluid, my enduring anguish of soul crushing sadness, alone, cast off, now fighting off tears of self pity and the return of the familiar lump in my throat, wanting desperately to turn around and go home and the choking pit of my gut brought by the penetrating psychic pain of the orphan realizing again and again like it was always the first time that there was no home to go back to. *I had no home*. At least I was away from Carrie and out of her stable. That was a plus. Such was the considered state of *my regular*, once and again a sad and solo wanderer.

Another Turning Point

Traveling by land through the vast, dry, southwestern deserts under the immense, cloudless, sky with the far edges of rugged mountain cliffs in view the scene reminded me of a cinemascope version of a John Ford film – trading a theater seat for a Greyhound with windows on all sides as wide as your eyes can see so a whole lot better, spectacular, surreal and just about worth the torture. After another cold and noisy, bumpy night of half-sleep rumbling through the Oklahoma panhandle we pulled into a roadside pit stop somewhere in northeastern Texas. There, as I came fully to on that sticky, vinyl-skinned bus seat the pain-soaked past of teenage turmoil seemed as if it was slowly receding and that it just might

actually evaporate into the mist of forgotten memory, like what you ate for lunch last Tuesday. It seemed possible. *Here I am, so anything's possible.* Lurching slowly but steadily forward into the vacant parking lot of a roadside strip mall the crystal clear western sky seemed as big as Heaven itself, probably just as blue. Exiting the aluminum covered-wagon the sun shone down on us at a perfect seventy-six degrees so shed my black leather jacket and with it some of the residual darkness still trailing me. After two days of Snickers bars and soda cans I felt hungry enough to eat whatever I could shoot if I only had a Winchester so at the only open, waiting, greasy-spoon grits house got myself into the spirit of the new setting by saddling up ranch-hand style to a counter stool and ordered some western-style, cowboy grub, steak and eggs and potatoes, hold the grits and burn the fries please and keep the fresh, hot coffee coming 'til I say *stop*, a breakfast worth remembering. Gradually, as if casting off the gloom and hunger of the days and nights just before I started feeling better, freer, lighter and even a cautious bit hopeful. *There were no warrants out for me, no sentencing dates, no one was on my tale, I'm healthy, not broke, young, and most of all free.* It was actually pretty great, all that sky, space, fresh open air and sun. What a morning – a new one, and a new image to try on for size, this kid, an Israelite from Ocean Parkway was out west following the in the footsteps of many a stout and hardy Hebrew soul before him like my grandpa' Eugene did for a spell before bringing his bride back to Brooklyn and earlier still, Levi Strauss, Solomon Star and Lou Franklin among them who left their marks more than a century before. Rejection and disaffection – the thick heavy shroud of cold winter – Topic House, the county jail, bad acid, what's'er name from Oceanside and the whole *college dropout-Barton's-Long-Beach-loser* fiasco of my past seemed further behind me with every forkful of feast and glance out the window at that stunning sky, yes, evaporating like the fading memory of a vague bad dream. On the way back to the wagon just outside the greasy-spoon the glare of reflected sunlight caught my eye, a pawnshop window hosting pairs of six-guns for sale – Colt 45s, Smith and Wesson .38s and .357 Peacemakers and what have you! That was a sight. *Wow!*

They were the real deals. We sure weren't in Brooklyn no more. No unreliable, serial numbers scratched off *Saturday Night Specials* here – these guns were *legal*, to be worn and seen and for *definite certain* fired when ready. After all, *that's what guns is for* so don't let nobody tell ya' nothin' different. Man this whole thing was real and there was still plenty further states and roads and sky to go before hitting the surf in LA. That bright and blue morning in that bus depot at that age, with that vision and on a full belly I took no small comfort in knowing that was the farthest I'd ever been or felt from any theoretical *home* – wherever that might'a been – by far and so it was then in the warm, morning sun's glare reflected off the gun barrels in the pawnshop window that once again the lonesome sojourner experienced the profound exhilaration following the persistent commands of his *wandering Jew* genes to *just go and keep on goin'.*

"*I got to run to keep from hidin' – and the road goes on forever – I got one more silver dollar ...*" (Greg Allman)

The Allman Brothers played the tune but the sojourner danced the steps. Next stop early that evening, just before sundown was at the outskirts of a little town in a big state named *Nevada*, probably a local Indian tribe name but now the main city was all *Anglo-Latino* called *Las Vegas*, its prominence largely another NY adventuring Jew's vision, a certain notorious character known in the press as the infamous Benjamin "*Bugsy*" Siegel. If it was a good enough fit for him it would definitely be good enough for me too, cut from the same cloth you understand, at least for my outlaw fantasy me. The wagon pulled into a truck stop for refueling, where casually inserted amid the pumps and heads and barstools were rows of quick fix *one-armed-bandits,* which I'd only seen on TV or film screens up 'til then, but knew how to operate the two simple steps for throwing away one's money so naturally figured it was time to give one of'm a go. After ordering a double Scotch on the rocks from the well, the sojourner was surprised by being handed back the change from a ten

in silver dollars. Seven or eight, not sure but no matter, inserted them one at a time, took a pull at each turn and waited, watching while nothing happened, no *ch-ching*, 'til I had but one more left, which after examining – and considering only having about three hundred in total to my name in the whole world, and heading towards some place I just may end up completely lost, broke and still alone, one more meant a lot – so blessed the moment by saying a quick prayer before dropping it in – pulled the arm, then as the dizzying, colored disks spun to a halt, one by one, *ch-ching, ch-ching, ch-ching* out pored twenty shiny new ones more – mine! I could hardly believe it. This was real? Legal? They were mine? I took one and planted it into my leather's deepest inner pocket and zippered it shut – telling myself it was a lucky coin and that as long as I kept it – I'd always have at least *one more silver dollar* and hence a bit of remaining good fortune. Some luck would bring more luck, I hoped. With that and back in the glow of cheap optimism I slugged down the rest of the now-quite-decent tasting Scotch then got back on the coach for the last haul. We'd be in LA by dawn and things were looking up.

The dull and hazy LA morning felt nothing like the one enjoyed in Texas the day before. The only impression I ever had of LA came from pop-media images that colored my distorted perception and as such were totally shattered upon arrival. Instead of being greeted by The Beach Boys doing Haight-Ashbury tunes or some kind of Malibu Barbie inspired hippie, surfer's dream – it felt like landing back in Times Square only gilded with ashen palm trees and smog instead of the tall buildings and huge, smoking billboards of my home-town. Yeah, now it seemed, if I ever had a *home*, New York City was it. Here though I saw so many Asians and Mexicans I didn't know what country it was! Where were all the white folk? Where were Fred MacMurray and his three sons? Uncle Charlie? Where were Grace Slick and Sonny Barger? I expected Big Sur and Monterey Pop scenes not sidewalks, vagrants and traffic lights. Oh well, *this is it* I thought – on with the show – time to get off the bus and hit the pavement, here we are and there we go.

Walking no more than a block or two – at most maybe three from the bus stop, *schlepping* my forty pound sea bag of clothes and a suitcase I chose a hotel – it looked reasonable enough – beaten down and seedy but livable, booked a room for a week then moved myself in. Countess Bessie, along with a big fat hundred dollar bill gave me that scrap of paper with a phone number for some well established relatives out there who they suggested I contact, possibly supposed to look out for me a little, not sure, it wasn't made very clear, but I waited a day or two to call then when I did just to just sort of check in and make contact with kin right away left a message with whoever picked up the phone, who wasn't expecting me or any call from any kin from New York and I never heard back, I musta' left the hotel front-desk phone and room numbers. It was a weak and perfunctory idea from the start. My family? Well, *close* is not an adjective I'd choose to describe them rather would use the phrase *diligently distant* and perhaps *estranged* as more apt which was exactly how it felt and exactly how it was even with my having *reached out in the darkness* like Bessie and Boris Julius suggested. Maybe my cousin Harry or his wife did call me back but don't recall getting any word of it or with it any invitation or suggestion of interest or concern even if we did speak and maybe I forgot but for certain we never met up and that was all of that, having pretty much given up on the half-hearted effort after fulfilling its minimal obligation, the one attempt. I coulda' called again, maybe given them time to warm up to the idea but time wasn't something I was too often willing to spend, it was always *now, now* and *now* and I hardly cared anyway, my expectations were pretty much rock-bottom as it was so it was easy to just write it off. Maybe they sensed trouble, a *bad seed* in exile and wanted no part of me or maybe they just didn't care to find out or be bothered so in place of open and welcoming kin on the other side of the *purple mountain's majesty* and *fruited planes* soon enough I'd meet a rich sampling of the sordid and similar as me denizens of downtown Los Angeles. Kin? What were they gonna do for me anyway? Pay for college? Buy me a car? Make me family? Not likely.

Most of my money spent on room rent and food ran out in about that first week and a half, so, out of the cheap hotel and reduced to sleeping on whatever downtown rooftops I could sneak up to while paying for suitcase and sea bag storage was my new reality. Things were now warmer but otherwise almost as bleak as they'd been in Long Beach, there was no daylight here either visible from the end of any tunnel, just more tunnel, longer and darker ending in abyss. All I could do was stall. Clueless at nineteen all I knew how to do besides paying bus fares was fucking up and failing. I tried to get a job, even naively paying a whopping 1977 fifty dollars for a haircut believing that it might help change my luck. It was a great haircut but it didn't help and fifty bucks was a fortune, it wasn't the hair it was the head that was the problem and spending fifty bucks on my appearance wasn't going to fix that. Some old coot gave me a part-time gig at a porno store just off one the main downtown boulevards where the gig was supposed to be looking out for and discouraging shoplifters but I couldn't take my eyes off the stock myself and the boss had his eye on me for purposes unclear – so after one or two shifts that didn't work out too well, he probably made up the job as a gesture of charity anyway, so again I'm on the prowl for how and where to make enough cash to lay my head under a roof rather than on top of one and grab my next meal. Yeah, now the youthful sojourner was living directly hand to mouth. Soon I met another young guy on the streets, a blond-haired, skinny, little man originally from Canada named Michael LaRue. Somehow, after having a few drinks and smokes together in a dark dingy stairwell I ended up with his ID – his stuff was in hotel storage (held for ransom supporting an unpaid bill) too and he needed someone other than himself to retrieve it – he musta' had a very significant disagreement with the old, grisly fellow who ran the operation over something personal I never asked about, so I ended up presenting his ID with his money and using them to claim the property. After getting it released, brought it to him but somehow after a few more beers and heart-felt rounds of "thanks" I honestly forgot to return it and he musta' somehow forgot to ask. Anyway, that's why his name stuck – from staring at that nineteen seventy something Draft Card

and wondering what a funky-cool name like LaRue would look like on a righteous Hebe from Brooklyn like me. *LaRue the Jew*, I liked it, or like *Bobby McQueen*, still do but never used it. Not yet. Still might. Stay tuned.

Afternoons spent prowling aimlessly on those warm, downtown, west coast streets, staring into the wide windows of chicken shacks and Mexican fast food joints on the strip marked me as a lost and hungry young stranger who dressed as I was marked me in my biker black leather, cowboy boots, Carrie's tight jeans, the deerskin cap with a Brooklyn goatee – as something I wasn't, imagining myself looking more like a badass, east-coast, *hip-street-outlaw* than a west-coast homeless *homo-street-hustler*, live and learn right? It was like *Midnight Cowboy* but without *Joe Buck's* innocent, good looks and imposing physique or a local, street savvy friend like Enrico Salvatore Rizzo aka *Ratso,* but try telling that to the lurking, man-eating, desperadoes who patrol along those pitiless corridors spreading about a few loose crumbs as bait while hoping to snatch themselves a full meal of hungry, young man, as they seem to interpret refusal and rejection as merely a tactic in the game of *hard to get*, so, in that dark tunnel they were on me like wet on water.

Then there was the time a buzzing crowd of pedestrians gathered on a busy, late-afternoon street corner. You could tell by the body language and tone of the murmur that something exciting was happening, something *out-of-the-ordinary*, maybe dangerous, something including a palpable element of risk somewhere prominent in the drama. The crowd was too thick for me to see what they were surrounding so maneuvered to get a better view until it was clear. Yes, *danger*. My favorite. Watching the two, trim, middle-aged, Asian guys positioned just outside a storefront, probably clothing, maybe electronics or jewelry, backs to it in full karate-command posture facing the crowd of ten or twenty pedestrians that formed a semi-circle around them. The two stood shoulder to shoulder at about three or four feet apart as two or three more of their guys were struggling to pull an also struggling, young

black guy inside, maybe a teenager. The two karate guys guarding the scene pivoted in one-eighty degree turns, back and forth, right to left then left to right, as if specifically trained for that action and well rehearsed, ready to punch or kick the first by standing witness that dared get too close and try to physically interfere. Although the gathering crowd of onlookers was excited and growing, maybe more than twenty after just two or three minutes, some in curiosity others in protest, within the cacophonous prattle could be heard "*let him go!*" and "*get off him*" no one made a move towards the action. Why were they pulling the desperately resisting guy into the store? It was an easy guess that he had probably been caught shoplifting inside and they intended to hold him for the police, a *citizen's arrest*, while another of their shop keeping crew must have already been busy calling. After just a few more moments of intense struggle they succeeded in over-powering then dragged him inside. With that the karate shopkeepers retreated back inside too where they locked the door, after which the gathered crowd gradually began to disperse. *Show's over.* For some reason I kept watching, my *danger-radar* still on active alert signaled that it wasn't over. Next thing you know, maybe twenty or thirty seconds after the door closed with all of them inside the black guy comes crashing through the front store window from the inside – they must have mistakenly let up a bit once getting him inside, letting down their guards prematurely he suddenly, amazingly, like an Olympic broad-jumping sprinter hurled himself through the front glass window by smashing it with the force of his leaping body shattering it into thousands if not millions of tiny, light reflecting shards of glass only to land perfectly positioned on both feet on the sidewalk where upon landing instantly broke into a full throttle dash down the street to get away. *What'a sight!* It was perfectly fluid, the leap, crash, landing and dash – they surely never expected anyone to try such a bold and desperate move, breaking loose from their grips to take a chance by barreling bodily through the huge, thick, front, plate-glass window let alone expect him to succeed at such a crazy stunt by crashing through it unharmed to make good his escape. Once they were all inside the store the scene seemed to unfold in *slow-motion*,

beginning after the door closing, the still murmuring crowd thinning, *show's over* including his sudden break through the pane and the spraying of glass until he actually hit both feet on the ground at which point real time kicked back in and the action returned to real-time speed as in fast as *Flash* 'til he was gone. It was quite an impressive display of fearless teamwork on their side and a stunning display of determination and athletics on his – he earned whatever he managed to keep that day, even if it was only his threatened freedom, better I'm sure than the LA county lock-up which I never had the opportunity to visit – though did manage to get myself a ticket for *jay-walking* that was never paid – good thing I still had my NY ID or maybe used LaRue's otherwise they'd'a takin' me in, an incorrigible outlaw like Mickey Cohen, yeah, that's me, only as a homeless vagabond, an east coast renegade jay-walking Jew if not shoplifting through the *city of angels* taking in the sights.

Once upon another aimless, downtown afternoon there was this encounter with a slightly overweight, middle-aged, Mexican-American fellow – a clean cut, white-collared looking guy – like an office worker or a small business owner who must have noticed me wandering around gazing intensely into restaurant windows. After a friendly and casual approach he offered me a beer and some polite conversation and me being from New York and not afraid of nobody out there didn't think he was a swarthy, Mormon missionary selling cookies for the children's church choir fund or another John Wayne Gacy – instead figured I could handle myself with this clownish, Mexican *maricón* whatever he wanted and was seriously hungry so a beer and a fresh burrito smothered with raw onions and Tabasco were too good an offer for me to turn down even if I had to pay for it with some friendly small talk, offer accepted. Hunger's a powerful driver, it was new to me so that more than anything else had me on edge and ready to compromise where and it could be managed. Sometime during the meal the guy asks if I wanna go to the race track with him at *San Andreas* and watch a few horses run, maybe place a bet and get lucky – *why not?* The name *San Andreas* appealed to me, the Latin sound and there they were, always

looming, beckoning, the snow covered peaks in the distance covering the horizon. Since there were no other more pressing engagements at this exact moment and the whole trip would be on his dime, more food plus he had a car so *si senor*, *vamanos*, let's go. After the races, nobody won nothing, and a few more beers at the track he suggests we go to a motel for few more beers so he doesn't have to drink and drive. The thought of spending another night on some sooty rooftop using my sneakers as a pillow urged me to agree. But of course, once checked in to the *No Tell Motel* and shortly after the first six-pack was downed it turned into a wrestling match where *Pablo the perverted playboy* is so over come with lust for the lonesome sojourner that he just can't contain himself and he's all over me or trying hard to be, but lucky for us both he was easy enough for me to out wrestle and repel without hurting him but it was a very awkward night of half-sleep, so, made an absolute commitment to never permit an encore of this particular stunt, gimme the sooty rooftop instead. Poor guy, so desperate for his *dickfix* he even went for me – a guy who'd never go that way no matter how hungry or was dressed – *what was he thinking?* This is a *hard to get* act? Faking it? Hiding my "gayness"? Dude! *Wake the fuck up!* Fix your radar! Not gonna happen. *OK? Never. Period. Whatever you do – your business, just don't come back to me* I told him *`cause next time it will cost sangre', grippers, yours.* There was a knife – I usually carried one, yeah, now I remember, that's right, and pulled it as a warning some time during or right after the tussle, a fisherman's blade about 4" long with a curved hook for gutting, I think, but I didn't actually mean it anyway – the blood part – he was no real threat – kinda' pathetic actually, *like attracting like* in that sense, but I also didn't want to repeat it so played hard like I meant it and hoped it would work and maybe even get some promised *shut-eye* on a bed *under* a roof instead of without a bed *on top* of one. *Man oh man this homeless shit sucks*. Next night it was back to smoking a joint by myself on some familiar downtown, rooftop, not exactly much of an improvement all things considered but just enough. *Homeless* really, really, truly sucks, that made its impression quite clear on me so committed, deeply that *however*

long this grossly unpleasant scenario lasts it was only to be a once-around event. I would do whatever necessary never to repeat it. In the meanwhile, where I got and how I paid for the weed, or clean clothes for that matter, who knows? Probably, at least the weed from LaRue but like they say *will* and *way* have a strong tendency to find each other even when the odds are stacked against them, and so hungry but not starving, alone but unharmed and with the San Andreas now hidden by the shroud of night, in the warm California dark of the sooty high-rise rooftop they just about did.

But that wasn't my only bedroom-wrestling match. It's happened before – rarely but distinctly more suitable, unfolding something like this: I'd be a lonely and lost enough soul somewhere strange and far, knowing no one when out of the stubborn fog of despair an *angel of mercy* would suddenly appear bringing a quick and fleeting dose of necessary relief, then as quickly as she'd arrive – again she'd be gone, vanishing back into the all too familiar murkiness of nowhere. It's happened. And so it was on another crowded corner one late, downtown, quitting time from a 9-5 *morning regularity* work day when the streets were filled Manhattan style with millions of rush-hour home go*ers* and travelers buzzing about and crossing paths in every awkward and conceivable direction that we met. She was on one jam-packed corner and I cattycornered on the opposite facing each other while waiting for the light to change and traffic to stop where we first locked eyes. It felt certain right away we'd connect. As the long light finally changed and the crowds began to converge and collide we navigated and guided our paths towards each other, to the literal crossroads where we both stopped, and from that moment on neither of us left the other's sides until the next morning.

The girl must have felt just as lost and just as alone as I did though maybe for different reasons. She may have been Mexican too – but the right kind of Mexican, female, speaking Spanish, only Spanish and at the time my *Espanol* was limited to only a few words and phrases, the vital ones like *tu eres muy bonita* which I learned to say

to the lovely *chiquitas* Hilda and Miriam in my junior high study-hall class, and a few assorted fragments of lesser phrases but we still communicated, eyes and smiles, hand gestures and gentle touches. Nevertheless, from the looks of her she must have been mostly from European stock `cause the petite, twenty-something lady was light skinned with light brown, chestnut colored hair and green eyes like mine, all in all, up and down, front and back, a real doll, the kind you scratch your head, look up into the sky and say *thank you* for. It seemed like she was alone for a purpose and unlike me not totally lost but rather had some articulable reason for being *soltera* in LA that day. In view of that, what may or may not have been her specific case she was surely feeling lost and alone when at just the right time and just the right place in the universe her pretty, seeking eyes met my desperate, lost ones and together, at least for the moment we became a couple found.

It's not clear when exactly this happened – whether it may have been while still in some hotel or out on the rooftops, most likely in between hotels and rooftops but it was sitting together on a cushiony couch in a dark TV lounge somewhere when it was decided that we would go back to her already paid for hotel room to spend the night. The only problem was though it was still daylight – her hotel allowed no guests of guests – at all – real low-end – not even before 10 PM, not even for five minutes and the reception desk was stationed right inside the front door main lobby so casually sauntering or discretely sneaking in through that way was out of the question as was paying any additional for the guest privilege. She had another idea. Walking me around the outside of the rundown urban dive and into one of its grimy alleys she pointed to the fire escape ladder which tracked along the upward column of hallway windows indicating that if I could somehow just get up to the first and lowest rung affixed to platform cemented and bolted to the second floor outer wall right above street level – I could from there easily ascend the cast iron ladder steps up to the floor where her room was on the third or fourth, then through the closest emergency exit hallway window which she'd unlock and open from the inside,

enter the building and walk through the hallway into her room where it'd be just ourselves together and home free for the promising night's events. Needing no further coaching off to work I went, stacking discarded, junkyard furniture on top of a closed metal dumpster then pushed the whole rolling contraption to right beneath the bottom platform and last rungs of the old, rusted and rickety, but sturdy enough, chipped paint fire escape ladder, mounted it and with a short but decisive one or two foot upward leap made it to the first and only challenging, lowest rung, pulling myself up on to the platform chin-up style, like a daytime cat burglar, then cautiously ascended the wrought iron slatted steps quietly, stealthily, careful so as not to draw attention from the streets or the hallway windows passed on the way up to her floor where as planned she waited, then finally climb through the open hallway window to her and her room where a moment of relief through the anticipated pleasure of a night of sweet, female companionship lay in store.

Next up, inside her cozy little chamber with stained wall paper, chipped paint from the ceiling cracks and a carpet that must have been some color when it was new but now almost disappeared into the morass of faded decoration was the big, queens sized bed, the sink, the TV and the wrestling match – all the essentials, it was she against me in this corner and me against her in that – all night long in that big cushiony mattress – my back scratched – bleeding lightly – she in her fishnet brassier and panties and me in nothing – not letting up and she not giving in, trying, resisting, resting and trying again and again all night long – but she wouldn't go for it – kisses, caresses, yes, but more scratching and biting, tugging, pulling and twisting breathlessly – the force of life itself fighting for fruition – she wanting to make me wait, fight for it – to beg for it – stretch it out – deny me – to go sleepless – and ultimately fail, which I did, all of that and to top it off to always remember her and that night. And I do. Women, maybe she just wanted to not be alone but instead find someone to tease and torment, maybe a lost, green-eyed and goatee'd, young guy like me. Women, w*ho ever really knows with them?* Imagine that.

The following morning, it's not clear which but soon we parted, either never having made plans to meet up again or just never having kept the ones we tried to make given the language barrier. For sure I looked for her again back on that same street corner at the same time for the next couple of days, and the hotel and TV lounge but with no luck. For that one desperate night though two strangers kept strange company, comforting in no small way – a brief break from solitude and alienation but more frustrating and memorable in the lasting ways – alive but barely kicking. From a superstitious interpretation she may have been sent from beyond just to keep me from a fate much worse laying in wait that night somewhere darker and even less certain, I may have helped spare her something similar, but for sure like the two proverbial ships of night at sea we passed each other slowly, briefly rubbing hulls as we drifted along our separate ways as before – never to cross again. Pardon the dreaded and hated but often fitting cliché.

Speaking of ships, reminding myself what I came there for – to sail the Pacific, or the dockworker fantasy, somehow I heard or read, must have made a direct inquiry by telephone that the Merchant Marine Academy back in NY was booked for something like the next two years. I still needed a place to sleep for tonight so there was no end of tunnel light visible there. On another night found myself sitting alone on a wooden *park bench* (the curse of Boris) in the legendary *Macarthur Park* humming the song to myself at dusk and "*melting in the dark,*" high on PCP aka *Angel Dust*. *Dust* was a weird high – it was some kind of chemical intoxicating hallucinogen they sprayed on cannabis to make it even more potent. That it did – but it never really made me higher in the sense of a better high, feeling any freer or deeper relief, it just made things seem darker, weirder, numb and at times made me damn near psychotically paranoid. So why do it? `Cause it was 1977 and at nineteen without much mind of my own it was part of the scene, and would do almost anything for a buzz except needles, even trying them once or twice too. Picked up Hep C in the process it was later revealed, a souvenir from a Harlem *shooting gallery* where along with another, older

RVC posturing *toughguy* who already picked up a habit I wanted to impress – let an older black guy give me "my wings" by sticking me with a syringe of only Zeus knows truly what but was supposed to be dope, *heroin,* a crazy kid desperate to prove himself in that way, a high-end risk taker, *I may even put out your lights* my main message, death row was waiting. No *bigee,* heroin or speed though? Them I'd snort no problem, just wasn't into sticking myself more than was necessary to prove I would, already did – or had the balls to (read *desperately reckless*) again so kept it to snorting, swallowing and smoking. No need to *shoot* again, by the way I'm pretty sure it was twice so no longer necessary, not even for *always-out-to-prove-something* me. Alliteratively speaking though *Dust in the Wind* summed it up – the pathos of detached solitude, *rootlessness* and *constantly on the run* temporality but rarely getting away from a continuing flow of more of the same, belonging nowhere, having no home. A hit at the time they played it over and over, *Dust in the Wind* by Kansas or Foreigner, some longhaired, hippie-leftover, white-dudes, middle-America, soft-core rock band – not really my style at all but even though, a plenty good tune for me then – fit perfectly – the song, the words, instruments and melody, sadness, longing, solitude, loneliness, "dust" in the wind, *dust* in the bowl I toked, dust in my brain, "*only for a moment and the moment's gone*." Indeed.

Another dusk, disappointed by my first sighting of this petty, little, piddling park – where I come from there's a city park simply called *Central* – now that's a spread – you could visit it every day for years and still discover the unseen – that's how rich and deep it is – but *this* park – the one Richard Harris recorded a long pretentious Jim Webb hit about – a pretty good song otherwise though – well you could see the whole thing from one bench and there was even less to it than that – even stoned on *Angel Dust* it was hard to find much interest there. Then, just as full hallucinogenic weirdness sets in along comes – you guessed it – another well-dressed and bearded, middle-aged guy, another Dairy Queen *fagola* on the make who sits down right next to me and starts some pleasant park rap and all I

could think was, *that's it*, *I gota' get out of LA*. The thing about *Angel Dust* – or PCP or whatever the heck it is, is that it creates a macabre aura of stillness wherein both the macro and the micro universes seem accessible simultaneously and existentially coequal. What I specifically mean by that is there, seated on a park bench, alone and far from anywhere known, wondering where I'm gonna sleep that night and literally from where will my next meal come, at the same time felt that whatever the answer is or isn't I am more than my body and its momentary needs; instead a small but vital part of everything unfolded around me – like an earlier heavy acid trip, part of every atom in the stars, dust, tree bark, the paint on the bench, the thick dark air of night – everything – and in that absolute sense there is no *me* – nothing, the ego's gone therefore there is nothing and no one to be concerned by or with – not food, not shelter, not the guy with the beard – nothing. Yet at the same time there is an undercurrent of low-level dread. "*Something wicked this way comes*" like – something you can't touch or feel but also can't ignore, maybe it's the sense of ubiquitous temporality: all things must pass and with them you and at the very end with them comes death, always waiting, silently and tirelessly following you keeping time, measuring thought and with each hollow moment's passing the scale dips a measure further in its favor. I can smell it, it almost has a taste – yet it's not terrifying `cause I'm numb but I'm not asleep either, rather a subtle yet profoundly unsettling stillness abounds, the stillness of eternity juxtaposed with the sense of momentariness, something crazy like that, hard to formulate in thoughts and words, weirdly psychotic, I know it's there. Sensing the movement of the shadow of the dark wings as they unfold around and above me and within them, ready or not I will one day be. Nice buzz, *right?* Cool fun party, *right?* Wrong. Excusing myself from the bench I wandered off in the direction of the tall buildings with the rooftops thinking about the lonesome, Mexican Pablito *el fagito* who took me to San Andreas and paid for some food before the wrestling match and his qualified offer: in exchange for say... casual *sodomy* a place to sleep indoors, a burrito and a beer if ever found myself that desperately hungry again. Nice fellow, real the *salt of the earth*

slime ball. Well, fact was I was hungry and still had his number on a paper scrap but rather than follow through on that depressing and risky consideration, caressing my pocketed fisherman's blade while considering it, empty stomach growling, sitting crouched on the ledge of one of my regular rooftop habitats and lighting up my last joint, took two or three hits, held them in deeply then crumpled up and threw away the scrap, instead vowing that that was my last night in town, in fact, it was my last ten minutes, I would head south to Long Beach, CA, a couple hours away by bus, *now*, tonight and take my chances there. Anything had to be better than trading companionship with *homos* for food and sneaking up on rooftops to sleep on, barefoot now having long since discarded my stale, stiff and filthy socks, using sneakers for a pillow. Turns out that was the right call, but not by very much.

Next Stop

The reason for selecting Long Beach, CA was obvious. First off it had the word *beach* in the name which even the mere suggestion of always warms me and I'd just come from a place by the same name figuring it would balance the scales somehow and maybe come out right, east Long Beach meets west Long Beach – so, how wrong could it be? *Good karma*, whatever that means. I don't actually believe in magic, unless of course it makes me feel better about a conflicted reality that can't really be sorted out or escaped from otherwise, like religion intends. Religion? Magic? Same things in my book back then, pretty much, one dressed up as do-gooder spirituality with the promise of immortality and righteousness, the other as entertainment but no one ever went to war over card tricks or pulling rabbits from hats, not that we know of at least. But who really knows? I'm no philosopher or judge; I didn't even have socks so on to Long Beach west for the next roll of the dice. It was only two hours away and I could afford the bus fare, where they might even have the long sought swaying palm trees, rolling sea shores and surfer beaches, greeted by bikini babes, love beads and the

welcoming shriek of the raging ghost of Jim Morrison: "*the west is the best – get here – and we'll do the rest!*" Well, here I came. I got here, now even deeper in *the west*, good, great, *now what* I wondered, where's *the rest* oh venerable, mystical, magical and long gone but never forgotten, your highness the Lizard King? Where? I'm here, baby. Now, *sock it to me!*

Another bus terminal in another seedy part of town and again with no place to go, it was dark and there were no familiar rooftops, no beaches either, at least though I could smell the salt air of the sea and that was always a comfort, there must be seafarer's blood somewhere back in my ancient DNA trail, I don't know how else to explain it. As a kid my favorite places aside from *the city* (Manhattan) and Philly (Mom-Mom's territory which to me was back in time to the *old west* with the cobblestone streets and Independence Hall) were the beaches of Coney Island and Atlantic City where Mom-Mom's mom, *Grandma' from Atlantic City* as she was known with her faithful companion and *aide-de-camp* my Aunt 'Til (Matilda) lived, the boardwalks, the ocean, saltwater taffy, cotton candy, candy apples, those people powered carts some folks like to get pushed around in, the meeting of dry sand and wet surf and American flags stationed on tall poles every fifty or so yards along the wooden planked, promenade that I stopped for, saluted and solemnly recited *the Pledge* to, hand over heart believing it was obligatory, every single one, where I played *King Neptune* in the waves smashing *Jason's* ship then jumping in over my head like *Diver Dan* looking for mermaids and sunken treasure and the villainous, chain-smoking barracuda – here now again, this time playing solo, a vagabond adventurer on the continent's opposite shore. Though I'd run out of clean socks and underwear much earlier in the sojourn, there were still somehow a few crumpled up greenbacks in my pants pocket and of course my lucky silver dollar but needed to be very prudent about how they were spent, so a low-rent flop-house or cozy rooftop were high up on the *search for* target list. Wearing the same socks for weeks 'til they grew hard and crusty from dried sweat and filth before finally throwing them out

was a trauma all its own (today you can find in my home two dresser drawers filled with them) and carrying that sea bag and suitcase made for more of a hassle just looking for a place than actually finding one became. Schlepping forever onward, held together by necessity and determination the march continued the quarter mile or so towards the cheap, neon come-ons of the main sea-front drag, barrooms, hotels and eateries, “Eat” “Drink” “Be Merry” stuff hoping to spot an accessible rooftop but before even getting there got my first eyeful of a young, blond-haired, she-rascal with a black-eye, a west-coast, beach-bum babe named *Carol* headed down the street straight towards me from the opposite direction.

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Naturally, the first thing noticeable about Carol besides her womanly shape on that sized just right 5’ 2” frame crowned by that blond, California hair was the few days old black-eye she sported on her left side, but it didn’t hide the fact that despite the injury’s rude interference with her facial appearance, she was still a pretty lady and no one could miss those amply jutting, firm teenage boobs. *Ooooh la la* as it’s said the French like to exclaim at such auspicious sightings, so, as we both kept walking even from way up the block she had my attention and what does she do with it? Just as she reached me, just as we were passing, saying nothing, not even seeming like she noticed me at all suddenly swings a fast, upward, openhanded, upper-cut like slap aimed at the brim of my New York deer-skin sending it sailing high up into the night sky about six feet above our heads until when it finally landed on the ground after what seemed like minutes, surprised by her crazy, risky gesture, even playfully intended, just looked at her, puzzled, a little annoyed but mostly amused, told her *now pick it up and give it back*, but as she did, like the wiseass, teenage street girl she really was, my match, grinned at me while eyeing me up and down, taking in the whole east-coast, stranger in town get-up, as if to say *just whadaya*’ *think you’re gonna do about it – shorty?* That was how we met, all attitude, attitude complimenting a wicked smile and healthy set of young, bubbling with life boobies. That’s probably also how she

managed to score the black eye too. Apparently, someone else wasn't too amused, or horny, or either while I was now fully both. Yup, she had an attitude problem all right, which suddenly entered my lonesome world and surprisingly delighted it. Anyhow, that was my welcome to the next *west-coas*t pit-stop, Long Beach, Long Beach California, home of the permanently docked Queen Mary and Carol the mad, black-eyed, teenage cap-slapper. Coulda' been worse, *right?*

It was maybe a week or two or even three later that we met again but it was clear from the first instant we met eyes after she up-slapped the cap we definitely had a more dramatic and much friendlier encounter together to come. Like on that busy LA street corner, sometimes you just know these things in an instant. Before that though the first few nights were spent holing up where ever could be found and made suitable including my *worse comes to worse* standby option, seedy hotel utility closets. One of my dependable tricks for shelter off the streets for the night was walking into a middling hotel sometime in the late afternoon as if a paid guest returning from a day trip, still able to pass for actively middle-class, hang out in a semi-public space somewhere inside, like the bar or a lounge and then around early evening, after the cleaning staff went home – casually travel the elevator or stairwell, floor by floor checking for an unlocked slop or linen closet, when after finding one pull down a thick curtain from an off center hallway window to use as a blanket and lock myself in to spend the dark night with the roaches and water beetles in a fitful state of semi-claustrophobic slumber. Hey, it was free, more-or-less safe and somewhat better than the alternative *hallelujah-homeless-soup-kitchen* rallies available, *missions* they call themselves where you had to lock-in by like 6 PM and share space with other hobos, vagrants and *who knows* what else, fugitives and the recently released jail-birds and best of all? My *hotel-slop-closet-crashing* routine – I got away with it. It was like the shoplifting expeditions back with Hannibal Hayes or Kaluga Whale, success was all in the way you carried yourself,

confident and relaxed, and of course finding and seizing the opportunity. *Carpe slop closet.*

"Gimme, gimme shelter or I'm gonna fade away..."
(Mick Jagger, Keith Richards)

One sea-breezy day, probably just before or just after spending a night in one of those *praise Jesus* missions, I connected briefly with two older, formerly east coast, currently vagrant gents a few years my senior and more experienced in the street-life shuffle than I. Looking like 1978 style burnt-out hippie leftovers, somewhere between biker tough and dopefiend pathetic they took me momentarily under their broken, grimy wings to teach me how to team shoplift fruit and bread from local supermarkets and later find more of those holy-roller flophouses with cots where they offered non-paying guests a meal and a day job with a temp agency all for the low, low price of an early curfew and attendance at a short prayer service just before chow. *Better than selling your blood* in my book, which they degraded to while I took a measure of pride in stubbornly refusing to sink that low, and better than another stuffy night locked in a dark, dank and moldy, mop closet. *Men only* though in the missions, and never mind I'm a Yid, a Hebrew, a Jew from back east, on that score no on asked and it's doubtful anyone cared, for as far as these obviously, righteously inspired, do-gooders were concerned *Jesus saves everybody*, just for the asking, *right?* Easy, simple, free. *Right?* Just surrender your soul. Just like bad-guy Satan bargains for, but he collects them and stacks them on a big shelf in Hell where you get tortured forever. Yes, the dead are tortured forever if it turns out they made the wrong choice. Okay. Nice image, like the guy suffering on the cross. What's with the *soul* thing anyway? What exactly is it and why is it in such high demand by these mythological heavyweights? Who cares? But they're quick to tell you that Jesus cares about them, and saves them from his nemesis, the devil with the pitchfork, tale, and horns. Even those of real bad-guys like *Manson*, *Der Furer* and *Pol Pot* they say, Jesus

loves them too, really! Mystifying to me that fantasy but okay, whatever, their bag not mine, this was America, big enough for everybody, *"*old testament*"* and "new." *Right?* The Long Beach Mission itself though, the one on Earth and right here in front of me? In fact, they even "save" lost, east coast, Hebrews far from home on a distant shore given the opportunity, Zeus bless'm. Kindness. Humanity cloaked in religion. I'm okay though religious-wise I figured, with or without *the Son*, whatever their *good-book* tells them as us faithful Yidden have a direct line to *the Father* through the first two of the *Ten* in the *old book* which we all seem to agree on, albeit understood and practiced somewhat differently, they can't eat fish on Friday and we can never eat pork type of thing, but I sure could use a meal and a safe, legal, indoor place to close both eyes and lay my head, even a cot in a lobby turned dormitory populated by assorted, snoring, snorting, farting and belching *ragamuffins* was an upgrade then – at least it was yielding like a bed – so everybody sing along: "*Jesus is just all right with me"* as the great *Byrds* song declares, "*Jesus is just all right – oh yeah.."* Whatever. It's okay, it's *all right*, as I say, I just needed some food and shelter and they offered them both so thank you, *all right* and *oh yeah* amen.

Back again to childhood, a small kid, the first movie my parents ever took me to a big, dark, spacious theater to see was Walt Disney's *Pinocchio*. What a flick! Made quite a lasting and deeply embedded impression. Unimaginable animation, unforgettable characters and songs telling a profoundly relatable story even to a child, *Candlewick* as my mom dubbed me, (*Peck's Bad Boy* added Mom-Mom along with "*shayna punim kinmons"* and kisses) the colors, the sounds and best of all for a kid like me, absolutely terrifying, the fuel for many a nightmare; big, fat, strong and evil, black bearded *Stromboli* and the aptly named *Monstro* the whale*,* a fearsome, gnashing, Leviathan bearing down on them as they fled by raft, the windswept shipwreck in a ferocious nighttime storm at sea, terrifying, delicious, one of my favorites and I loved it. Almost everyone knows the basic theme but for those who may not;

Pinocchio combines elements of many classics, from the biblical story of *Jonah* to the archetypal tales of animate from inanimate beginning with *Adam* from dust to life through *Frankenstein's monster* stitched together with assorted parts of dead and buried human bodies. Which was the first? Who knows? The answer is deeper than collective memory can find. But Disney? *Wow!* When he's on – does'm like no other, like it's the very first one, so we remember. Pinocchio – maybe the first animated feature, a cinematic masterpiece is the story of a wooden marionette carved by an old gentle soul, the lonesome, kindly, gray-haired Gepetto. His wooden boy with strings wants to be a "real boy" with a real soul without dependency on strings so he can give real comfort and real companionship to his earthly, woodcarving creator. As my memory serves (and fails) it is with that intention that he sets out on the noble quest accompanied by an equally unforgettable sidekick character, his *conscience* incarnate, a spirit guardian who offers both wisdom and guidance, though, as boys will be boys, strings or no strings, is rarely followed, we have to find out for ourselves, the gentleman *Jiminy Cricket,* a tiny, classy, little bug creature who wears a top hot, tux, carries a walking cane and a fairly decent tune. Together they wander far to where in Pinocchio's bold naiveté they stumble into many a perilous adventure and face many an accompanying risk, protected by the occasional but timely appearances of the *Blue Fairy*, the archetypal magic mother, in what literary scholars call a *hero's quest.* Not for the timid, neither the quest nor the film, for while there may be probabilities on that journey there are certainly no guarantees, the risks and rewards are yours to take.

The part of the story that fits into where we are now – on the lost and hungry streets of Long Beach is when Pinocchio and Jiminy are escaping from evil *Stromboli* the slave-driver on the hellacious cauldron of horror fiendishly misnamed *Pleasure Island*, where real bad boys and ordinary wooden ones are magically, slowly but unstoppably turned into kicking and braying, terrified mules. They escape from one terror into the jaws of another using a flimsy raft, fleeing at sea by night where they are quickly thrown into the

tumultuous chaos of a horrendous storm and if that wasn't bad enough? Pursued by the ferocious *Monstro* until all hope of further escape is lost when gaining on them then bearing down they are swallowed whole by the beast, raft, sea water and all. The mesmerizing terror of the spectacular violence displayed on that giant, vividly colored screen enhanced by the theater's all-engulfing sound could hardly have left a deeper or more powerful impression on me. Now, this part is really puzzling, maybe it means *escape*, maybe it means the womb or death the ultimate escape but ever since then dreamed of going to sea, getting out there, be somewhere afloat on the vast ocean. I already was a real boy and like the hero's archetypal doppelganger *Candlewick*, a bad one so maybe, somehow that's where fate waited patiently like the tide? Adrift towards a terrifying, inescapable doom upon *la mer,* but in any case, first to cut the strings.

Another mesmerizing film embedded by watching over and over though at home on a smaller black and white screen leaving no lesser an impression was John Huston's 1956 masterpiece *Moby Dick* starring the powerhouse of dramatic and charismatic talent Gregory Peck as the mad *Captain Ahab* named after an evil Israelite king. There was a nightly primetime television program called *Million Dollar Movie* which opened each evening's presentation with the theme music from *Gone with the Wind* and broadcasted the same film every night at the same time for a week, seven nights in a row allowing anyone who might have had a work or family schedule conflict to catch the film at least once during the steady run. They may have even screened it twice on the weekends as well, a Saturday and Sunday afternoon matinee. At age six or seven I sat in front of the living room television screen eating jars of sourballs and packages of chocolate chip cookies washed down with orange juice by the quart and watched it over and over, all week long, never having enough, memorizing the lines, scene by scene and repeating them for Mom-Mom who listened intently and made a great fuss about how smart her *Bobby* was, reinforcing my interest even deeper. Unforgettable lines, "*Call me Ishmael*" like the book began,

the narrator's opening and Ahab's repeated almost rhetorical query "*What... do you do... when you see the White Whale?*" I'll never forget hearing the measured intensity of his feverish delivery, which somehow only enhanced the fantasy of going to sea. There was dread, determination, and urgency. It's not that I wanted to get chased on a raft or hunt and kill a whale – just seeing one close up, like the one my father took me to see at the *Museum of Natural History*, a terrifying gargantuan Sperm with its tiny, menacing eyeball staring at me, just seeing one free and alive in its natural environment on its own terms would have been enough. Ideally, that sighting would occur from the safety of a big boat, *Peqoud* sized or larger, better still like a US Navy, steel decked and lethally armed battle ship or submarine but whichever, I just wanted to set sail and get *underway,* so here I sat in Long Beach west, reminding myself, kicking back for the moment, drinking beer, smoking a cigar, crouched on one of the huge stone boulders piled alongside and on top of one another on the rocky shore, under the stars, just to the side beneath a jutting dock, staring at another silent, gargantuan beast, the forever anchored *Queen Mary,* for that express purpose. At least now I had one, a target, tryin' to figure just exactly how to get myself fed, clothed, off the streets and out to sea.

Back to Carol, back to the cap-slapping, madwoman, indeed. Yes, back to her. It didn't matter that the short time before she greeted me in town with her style of mischievous taunting – no problem – she'd get hers, but to that end I'd retaliate with something more fitting, contact of another sort, perhaps gentler with the poor, young, black-eyed, boisterous and big bosomed beauty. Somehow, random probabilities within a finite space our paths managed to collide again. On one enchanted, salty evening, in fact, ironically enough, a stranger's last before his permanent departure from the uncertain streets and flophouses of west coast Long Beach, *thar she blowed* again. Soon, I'd be heading to my next stop and in order that the new recruit not get lost, MIA, KIA or AWOL Uncle Sam put me up a few nights just before in a Holiday Inn style hotel room located a discrete distance from the beach after which I'd be boarding another

bus, this time on my way south to Fort Nimitz, San Diego for *basic*. After a few rather less enchanted evenings of half sleep behind the bar at a closed, beer-only biker tavern, Budweiser of course, charity missions and hotel utility closets when the sudden chance to upgrade and bed down with a fine young lass in the comfort of a first-class, two star hotel – still somehow having saved a few bucks from hustling day-labor jobs provided by the *Jesus is just alright with me* mission I quickly grabbed it with both hands for all it was worth. Of course though, there was a hitch It seemed the lady was a wanted woman, another future fugitive Bonnie Parker in the making, and not just by me and any other red-blooded, nineteen year old guy with two eyes and a sea bag overflowing with hormones, but also by a clique of young, pissed-off, local, weed-peddling, street hoodlums who somehow got the notion that she owed them money for some meaningful weight of weed they allegedly fronted her to sell, for which she had not fully up to that point provided. In other words, she was basically robbing them by taking their property then attempting to elude them but without leaving town. This sad and desperate tale she confessed to me almost immediately upon our second, spontaneous nighttime encounter, semi-plausibly explaining that she only needed just a bit more time to pay the bill, to which I responded to that revealing revelation with my coolest bravura, assuring her with my well practiced and sincerest testimony that her troubles were now over and that she found her protector, beginning now, from whatever fate they might direct her way – never then, like with Espo's busted jaw on Halloween, imagining my bold claims would so soon be put to the test, almost immediately, and I'd actually have to fulfill them, my *anything-to-get-laid* and *not-another-all-night-frustrating-wrestling-match* promise anytime soon. I mean after all, for all intents and purposes, I'm outa' here manana*, so just exactly how risky was it?* No sooner though were these braggadocios words spoken, standing there in the shadows of the pier, yards away from the looming majesty of the mighty mentioned vessel – fate directed they then appear, the predatory gang of drug-financiers of whom she spoke. From up the street about a block away she saw them coming and pointing them out,

warned me that now was the time to put word to deed, implicitly clarifying for me that if there was any chance at all of fulfilling my dream of a night of full contact intimacy with this nubile, young, mischievous nymph, the time to earn it was fast and inevitably approaching. As the rough and ready looking street locals got close, spotting us at just about the same time we saw them, speeding up and quickly closing in, now only feet away, five or six of them, white kids, they hesitated but with the exercise of a bit of reasonable caution surrounded us before asking me who I was and did I know who she was? Easy questions. And now the hard part. With my reserve of quiet and cautious confidence to assist me stepped up to and went face to face with the apparent leader of this pack who looked like they'd rumble but not necessarily go totally savage. "*What are you supposed to be?*" he asked, eyeing me up and down to size me up, "*some kinda*' *New York toughguy?*" "I'm Rob" my reply and knew full well who Carol was and what they wanted, "I go by Kabbo, *she's with me now*" including that "I'll take care of it" (Bert be talkin' big shit again) and if they gave me some time all would be settled to everyone's satisfaction (firstly and especially mine). No one made another move. All quiet. My bluff was working simply by standing the ground, keeping cool, responding confidently without fueling further provocation. Other than that I don't know how or why the gambit actually worked, it only needed to that once, maybe it was wishful thinking on their parts, *they might actually get paid*, from her probably not or not as swiftly or surely as I musta' gave them false impression they might be by this "some kinda' New York tough guy," disguising the fact that the my only sincere commitment was to what's already been stated. My alleged sincerity came across as believable enough and luckily, mighta' been the stashed silver dollar, the bit of seldom called upon bravado, real or contrived, a bit of both hit its mark. They backed off. I'd been acting like *some kinda'* confident *toughguy* all my life so it came pretty naturally despite usually being half a head shorter than most of my challengers and would-be tormentors attempting to make up for the size and height disadvantage with sheer, fearless and remorseless viciousness, which occasionally, if not often, succeeded and tonight

my otherwise thin but well-practiced impersonation of a hero seemed to really pay off. Everyone bought it, even she seemed to and to an extent so did I even while knowing it'd probably take something much more dramatic were we to be cornered again or my bluff otherwise called, but then I always did come up with something, even like at the jail house card game and window smashing vandalism spree, something disastrous.

After a bit more token *toughguy* posturing themselves the boys walked away content to let the stranger have a chance at what he told them he would do and Carol found herself a dependable, if transitory hero. At least Mr. Some Kinda' New York Toughguy bought her some time, who knows what they might have done had they caught up with her by herself that night? People get hurt, even female people in those kinds of conflicts. The fact that tomorrow was the starting point of the next chapter of my cross-country adventure was kept discretely to myself. No one would have benefited from that untimely disclosure, least of all me and my pressing need for a blissful night of female companionship and sincere desire to fill my empty hands with her precious, personal assets. Yes, the processing was through, the papers were finally in order; my ship, actually another bus would soon arrive so everything was just about set for me to make my next escape move and get underway.

Hand in hand through the thick salty mist under the hazy glow of the Pacific moon we breezily strolled, excited by the anticipation, towards the long boulevard of cheap seaside hotel townhouses and barrooms, the very same I headed towards upon arrival two or so weeks earlier, where she knew the turf and led the way. It wasn't long before we found ourselves checked into just the right, somewhat forsaken, nineteenth century townhouse dive, with cracks of chipped white paint peeling from the tall, salt-stained, double door columns and loose step stones shifting under foot on the front stair veranda, but still impressive with large and dusty oil painting portraits of sea captains mounted on the walls and a wide spiral

staircase under a big crystal chandelier leading from the center of the lobby up the stairs to the three or four floors of rooms which appeared mostly vacant in wait for some lovin' to come along and liven'm up. Well, here some came. Anxious to get comfortable, she got ahead of me, climbed the stairs holding the keys just as her escort now host was finishing up at the front desk, and after unlocking our room door, she returned to my call and tossed the original, archaic, weighty, brass keys down through the open inner space column of the stairwell where into my waiting palm they landed with a crisp, hard and solid smack, a perfect drop, an impeccable snag, like in a movie where everything is timed and placed exactly pin-point-perfect. With that it was clear that the next event up, the private one behind the relocked door was gonna be just as good, *real good*, a most excellent snag like the key drop, and as anticipated it most memorably was.

With business at the front desk finished and keys in hand, I climbed the old creaking stairway to our third-floor love-nest and entered the large, brightly lit, single-room palace, this one a bit more homey than the one I climbed the dumpster to enter. There was another queen-size bed and full bath, a high ceiling, and a large bay window covered by long, thick drapes, only to find not Gideon's bible but my mischievous little lady drawing water for a hot, sudsy bath. It was one of those big, old fashioned, free standing porcelain tubs with cast iron legs shaped like scaled dragon feet and legs or eagles claws, the water was steaming and the flow powerful, she looked so lovely as she stooped over, diligently testing then adding bath soap bringing the gushing stream to a rich white froth, the hotel musta' came with the bubble stuff `cause there was plenty. After we both got in, she was mostly covered by them, except of course the tops of those big, milky white boobs, and she was wearing that same devilish grin as when she slapped the cap off my head. *See ladies?* Aside the tits and ass for guys like me it's really all in the eyes. That seductive gleam of interest and delight just about always gets me; it makes even the previously plainest looking ladies light up with erotic heat and fire for me. Everything else, pretty hair and

perfumes, giggles and blushes, etc., only support that. The eyes – that look – that smile, the gentle blue veins accentuating the firmness of her flawless alabaster skin, the big, perfect, jutting pink nipples teasing me through the suds, her laughter, the gentle cooing, deep slow kisses, my smiles, slowly rubbing warm, wet feet on bare shoulders, lighting a fresh, fat, cigar and taking a long, slow, swig from my liquor bottle. On special occasions like this I dispensed with the usual malt beverage opting for the more powerful and expensive, fancy stuff like usually *Johnny Walker* or *Jack Daniels* which were just about the only two hard liquors I could name, and felt like a big man now enjoying his well earned prize. Bluff or not, didn't much matter, at least I bought some time through a narrow escape and the risk was real enough, they could have thumped her and me at the same time which was probably what they intended when they first discovered us, so felt entitled to really enjoy myself, my girl, the booze, the warm soapy tub, the smoke and the moment, the whole scene like a dream, a good one, no bluffing there. After the leisurely, honeymoon-style bath it was off to bed where nature followed its glorious and unimpeded path, the two became one. All that crazy back-scratching and wrestling for control wasn't really necessary to leave a lasting impression, there are indeed much better ways to lay down some rich and long lasting memories, the action that night with Carol is one of them, and this story? Proof.

The earlier mentioned bar that sold nothing but *Budweiser* and only in 12 oz. cans (at least they were cheap and cold, *crazy* California), during breaks between searching for places to sleep, working factory day-labor jobs, shoplifting food and drinking lots of cheap, commercial, workin' man's beer like *Bud, Miller* and *Schaefer* became a semi-regular stop being that they also served minors under twenty-one without a hassle. On this particular, sawdust and dartboard joint there was an over-weighted, bearded, boozed-up, Harley ridin' biker dude in his thirties that from *out-of-nowhere* and for no conceivable cause pledged his nearly tearful, undying loyalty to me, just what we needed, more *crazy*. When people act like they love me too much, right away? Bad sign, yellow alert, this I already

learned, it happens, and real disappointment is always at hand. Frequently bitter, as in the *deaf, dumb, and blind boy*, *Tommy* that couldn't deliver the messiah the mob demanded, not even the false one, he was just real good at pinball, that's it, so they crucified him. Right? Whatever fantasy they had of me was surely mostly concocted in their own heads, not the real world so when the inevitable conflict arrives? Brace yourself; dangerous disappointment is sure to follow so I never returned the enthusiasm. If he bought me a beer I bought him one back, polite but not too friendly. That's it. This guy wouldn't have been so easy to wrestle, he'd have to be cut, and there was no point wasting myself on the likes of him like that. The easier and surer method is to just scram. Live and let live, but at a distance. I'm no one's messiah. Not tryin'a be either, *California dreamin'* something else.

While spending most of the days trying to solve the little homelessness dilemma on a more permanent basis by combining the need for shelter with the growing desire to satisfy my enduring sea going fantasy, it was right there, all that was needed was a boat, I was constantly surveying the scene for quick, tangible resources. One night the bartender at the beer bar let me sleep behind the bar after closing, an act of kindness not forgotten but there hada' be a better way. As also mentioned, they told me the Merchant Marine Academy back in New York was booked up for the next few years so no relief there, what was needed was a solution that could be put into play tonight, or at worst by the end of the week. Option two coming in at mid-range *second place* was to make my interest and availability known to the local US Navy recruiter who spent his days diligently grinding the gears to gravel in search of new recruits to sign on the military dotted line. Every one's looking for something. So much so was he diligently grinding that he was willing to overlook the fact that his new prospect was currently on *felony probation* for a conviction in New York – albeit "unsupervised status" (or so I was led to believe, more about that fiasco later, including another lengthy surprise stay at the *monkey house*) and was therefore technically (or legally?) ineligible for active duty

service (so it seemed). Not only was he willing to overlook that unfortunate but admitted detail but he was also willing to supply me with "*chits*" he called them, vouchers that would provide me a hotel room and a meal ticket at that local Holiday Inn type of place courtesy my rich and generous Uncle Sam on a *day-to-day* basis, as needed. What a guy he was, really, I told him the truth, the whole truth while he musta' left it out, the probation detail or maybe it didn't matter then but whichever way it was handled I swore to it and kept moving forward. He had a quota to fill and the pressure that came with it and I desperately needed some clean socks, etc., and the pressure that came with all that so a temporary pair-bond of mutual interest was formed. *Ain't this country great?* Land of opportunity!

One night though, after all the testing, screening and paper filing, while waiting for my ship to come in (the papers to clear) in the hotel room the hideous cluster thing hit, a monster in my head, behind my right eyeball. You never know the *when* but the *how* is mostly the same. It starts with a subtle but noticeable and growing awareness of my right eye, then from awareness to a slowly intensifying pressure, a growing throb in sync with the heartbeat, now twisting and tearing, a reddening swell of the upper cheek and eyelid, tears and mucous forming, from there to a repeated pounding all over the upper right side of my face, jaw to temple, nerves tightening like a crushing knot of fire burning into the right side of my brain and skull. It was so bad this time, maybe the worst, fighting for air, just to breathe – had to call the local ambulance, thought of jumping out the hotel window just to stop the pain. Who needs acid? It occurred to me and kept coming back, the idea, suicide as an antidote, not in sorrow or even rage but simply as an escape, certain relief, that's pain. At times I'd play-act practice shooting myself in the head where the pain was focused as a last ditch effort thinking: *all else has failed*, *this'll do it.* Bad. This time though? When they got there I made them give me pure oxygen from a tank which seemed to do the trick but only after about the usual hour of sustained then slowly subsiding agony. Once the knot

untightens, even a modicum, though not yet loose, I know it's passing and can breathe again, still slowly but without moaning, cursing, crying and prayers... Look, don't tell me any state secrets. I'll sing like a bird, right, a canary. Guaranteed. How was I ever gonna make it through basic with these things dogging me? Were they going to stop for oxygen hits on demand? I doubted it. What choices do I have? I'm alone on the streets, nothing and no one to turn to except my Uncle Sam so to him I did. Where else? Momma? Poppa? Jim Jones? *Hey*, I consoled myself once the EMS guys left and it passed, at least while waiting there was a place to sleep off the streets from time to time and best of all I was heading out "to join the fleet" at sea where we'd stalk *Monstro* and *Moby* and I'd get to be on guard for Soviet subs on patrol. Sink'm with *FIRE!* Now *that? That* would be an adventure worth taking and pretty damn cool to look back and tell my grandkids about, war or no war. Okay now. I can breathe again. Thank Zeus. Or Neptune. Pass the bottle. Anchor's way and *full speed ahead.*

"What do you do with a drunken sailor?"

As the night spent with Carol, unbeknownst to her and the drug gang was set to be my last on the uncertain streets of Long Beach west, at least for a while before hitting Camp Nimitz, another hour or two farther south by bus to San Diego, a classic one-night affair I made the most of it and at some level so must've she, the *easy-come-easy-go* suddenness of it, already in bed together on only our second chance encounter. On the other hand, she might have had something else in mind when earlier that night, just after the street facedown, but already in our honeymoon palace when she reached into her carry bag, pulled out and handed me a CO_2 gun, a gas canister fueled starter's-pistol she kept which was just one, short, step shy of illegal. It couldn't really kill, not a human, but it could definitely get you killed by terrifying someone else perhaps armed with the real thing, like a cop or a robber, it looked real enough, like a long-barreled .38 or .357 revolver especially at a distance and especially at night and it could maim. She probably thought I'd use it if I had to on her pursuers and she was probably right at that, so caught up in my *toughguy outlaw* fantasy, bordering on homicidal even on a good day, but not this time, no, it wasn't my fight, I wasn't sticking around or planning to come back or shoot anybody for her, toy gun or real, big breasted and cute or not, there were new adventures in store and in front of me plus she wasn't really my girl, we just met, Kabbo coulda' been number three or four or maybe even five or six or seven, wild west gal as she was, who knew? And the weed money? Well? That wasn't hers either. Women, *who ever knows?* Cackling cliques. So, early that morning before she woke, before leaving the hotel room I put the barrel of the six shooter replica through the center of two or three brightly colored hollow toy rings, like plastic donuts that turned up floating around the drawers of the room, the kind children play with in the bath and left it like that on the pillow next to and pointed at her head. In so doing, before exiting, kissed her gently on the forehead, and like we say in Gravesend, as a final *au revoir, that was for the hat.* Sleep long and sleep well, pretty chiquita, *see you on the other side*.

Lee Woodrow, another cool name, a WASPY one, not sure his rate but the sharp, soft-spoken, middle-aged, uniformed navy man was the recruiter/big brother type that slipped me those life-saving chits you were supposed to get only one or two of rather than the five or six or more I needed to stave of total homelessness and all consuming despair while we both waited for the paperwork to clear and for me to *ship out* as they say, down to San Diego where a billet and cot would be waiting for me at the navy basic training center in Camp Nimitz. He was a cool dude, Petty Officer Woodrow but the detailed and regimented process of enlistment? Beyond the swearing in it had more to do with testing, physical, mental and psychological than it had to with any sort of advance preparation so the recruit knows little of what to expect other than what he may have seen in the movies or on TV, drill instructors yelling, the ritual head shave, precision marching, chin-ups, obstacle courses and the like. No clue about all the book learning, demerit system, or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, he hadn't said a word, in place I just expected a lot of inspections, clothes folding, and boot polishing routines, expectations of that sort, like summer camp with grown kids, nothing overly demanding for your average, nineteen year old homeless, drifter, it wasn't the Green Beret or French Foreign Legion so I felt ready. By the time I got there though, even after all I'd been through so far found myself still very much me, *shootin' my regular* again – in *the pan*, that is primed for fucking up. *Fuckup* and *failure* were all I ever knew and all I ever really expected those days. Up 'til then my whole life was a long, practically uninterrupted cascade of *fuckups*, so why break a good, solid, and dependable losing streak for the challenges of success and the unknown? To that, failure I was accustomed. Anything else? What for? Why bother? *Morning regularity* as they call it, my brand. Anyway, Lee and I exchanged a few postcards during my stint in basic and I left my sea bag stuffed with all my *civies* with him with the understanding I'd pick them up after basic was completed. I never got them back, too ashamed to ask and I'm pretty sure he had the smarts and the heart to make some decent use out of them, probably gave them to another lost and homeless, street kid who

needed a little lift on his way to the other side of some bridge he needed help crossing in life and was otherwise alone and on his own. But Lee could only help me get there – the path, not help me cross it, you have to do on your own, the *boy to man* bridge, the one I took the first step on at Jenny's that morning more than a year before. Usually that's a father's job but in my case, well? You already got that picture. I had guys like Mickey Cleava, Jim Jones, Jack Moreno, Michael Wilkinson, Mike Kempler, and Jimmy Deodato, and now Recruiter Lee as temporary stand-ins. Whoever it is or isn't, a good guide only leads, firmly and surely, and in the right direction, but upon arrival at the crossroad, releases his grip and lets go. From that point forward, it's all on you. That *is* the point.

The test results came out classifying me A1 fit for duty – they must've graded the psychological on a very lenient curve or my bluff worked there too and even better than that, rated me officer material – my IQ tests ranked higher than anybody else's in my one hundred man company, 016, but that mattered little to me, it only meant more would be expected and that meant the pressure to fail increased accordingly. I still don't honestly know exactly what the fuck went wrong. It was like upon arrival a clock started ticking somewhere silently in the background, a countdown until inevitable breakdown, a looming failure via total collapse of will, the familiar self-destruct instincts once again taking over. There's no clear recollection of it actually kicking off or otherwise sensing it kick-in but it could be felt, it was definitely there and could be gauged by my otherwise inexplicable behavior, the ill-timed and inappropriate laughter, the day-dream drifting when orders were shouted, the fighting, the sudden sour attitude. Powerless to stop it, feeling once again like a helpless spectator just along for the painful ride of my already depressingly, predictable life. I had no idea what success or achieving it by overcoming obstacles ever felt like and aside from completing the year at Topic House, feet held to fire as they had been rarely, if ever, saw anything of any consequence through to a successful conclusion, nothing that didn't come easily and instantly

that is. Okay, I did manage to learn most of my bar-mitzvah *haftora* which was no small or simple task, in addition to the modern and biblical Hebrew that you have to already know you then learn an obscure variant and accompanying symbols for musical notes, how they sound and are sung, attach them to scripture, words, phrases, syllables, then chant them aloud and in sync with the service, publicly, as much of it as you can and mostly from memory. No modest task, really, not for anyone, only hard work and dedication cuts it, no short cuts, hence the value of the ancient rite of passage, yet, all in all, much easier than having one's foreskin clipped at thirteen. Okay, yeah, but that was a critical exception achieved only with the committed support of family and community, a private tutor and my deeply held respect for tradition, so it happened. A rare exception. More characteristically, never even earning (grudgingly) more than one or two (meaningless) *merit badges* in the scouts before being excised from the Cub Scout pack back in Brooklyn, where a few of us eight or nine year old, fun-lovin' lads attacked the older girls, one or two of their older sisters by dragging them kicking and screaming into the bathroom to tickle while stripping them until the *den mother* came in and put a quick stop to it and to us. *Boys will be boys* in my playbook and a hell of lot more fun and interesting than pretending to be interested in learning how to set forest fires with sticks and stones or tie knots as though we lived in the *old west* not Brooklyn where we had the latest twentieth century gadgets like matches and zippers, staplers and the wondrous cans of lighting fluid. Anyhow, as an aside to the stream of constant failure I'd done worse, much, better left unsaid, perpetrated more vicious cruelties and cowardly abuses, this was kid-stuff. The girls? Despite the noisy performance were blushing and laughing along with us as they ate up the attention while struggling to stop us, we never got past their brassieres anyway and no one got hurt (*Civilization and Its Discontents,* again) but real cruelty, the heartless, sadistic kind, not kid stuff, gets passed along down, I'll defer on further disclosure as discretion is sometimes the better part of spilling one's entire gut, at least for now. Anyway, take my word for it; now back to *Camp*

Nimitz where fucking up like it was normal and obligatory, my own particular version of morning regularity taking root.

I wasn't expecting wall paper and area rugs, but the bleak barracks looked as Spartan and remorseless as they could make it – this wasn't summer camp – not even Ten Cell, where at least we could paste *short-eyes* centerfolds to the walls, nothing homey at Camp Nimitz, where most of the day was divided between marching, chow-hall, push-ups, running, cleaning and class-room time. That was when they set me up to "find out," by making me the company *education officer* which meant tutoring the other recruits who had trouble remembering the different characteristics of fires we might have to fight out in the fleet or key details of the UCMJ, the Unified Code of Military Justice like Standing Orders and *chain-of-command,* the basics of basic military life. My memory worked well enough but I didn't care. Not a wit. There's the rub. I'd gone mysteriously but profoundly astray practically as soon as getting off that bus from Long Beach, so yelling at me or cajoling or being harsh or even kind and supportive meant nothing, my course was already set on another dependable Kamikaze Kabbo nosedive, i.e., my *regular.*

Weak positivity may have lasted a few days, maybe even a week without a *demerit* but by the end of the second or beginning of the third week they were already piling up. A recruit is allotted a certain number, it's to be expected, if you perform so wonderfully that you don't gather any something's wrong with the training, they want you under pressure, they want to see the stress cracks so they can work on fixing them. Mine were easy to spot as I barely even tried to hide them; rather I tended to flaunt them. That's the way boot camp is designed and rightfully so, it's suppose to prepare you to be a soldier, a man, not a failure, a sailor who very likely might be sent to war to defend his home, country and family, serious stuff.

During inspection, as I stood at rigid attention in front of my locker, trying to be serious, the guy just across from me, another faulty circuit and one of the only guys shorter than me, "Maggot," as they thoughtfully nicknamed him, the funny-looking recruit directly in my line of sight was deliberately eye-balling me, making even weirder faces than his naturally was, like a bald lemur or hairless weasel, as I was being loudly dressed down by the Petty Officer – what else could I do but laugh? Practically right in the PO's face, it was hysterical, his bunched-up, squirrelly face sucking in his cheeks, closing and popping open his eyes, rhythmically repeating the gesture every two seconds until the damn just broke and I cracked up. *Demerit.* As we know, the more pressure not to laugh, I really tried, the funnier the provocation is, it's just one of those bizarre and ironic laws of nature, like with inhaling too much weed in front of the girls and trying not to cough and tear up only much more serious than actually funny. As you can imagine POs don't appreciate being laughed at, especially not by recruits while they're yelling, doing their main jobs, instilling respect for command. There were two of them, CPOs, one black guy, and one white guy. The white guy that seemed slightly over the weight limit, a couple years younger than the other, early thirties, the one in my face, had dark hair, wore a trim goatee, and was always in his dress blue. He was the hot head. Him I didn't dig, *bad cop*, but the other one? The black guy with a close cropped full beard, another Chief Petty Officer or CPO, he was *good cop*, always cool, naturally, like so many black folk are when not seduced by provocation, real or imagined, on top of life's everyday challenges, into rage or entitlement, giving in to feral impulses and the inevitable personal and social tragedies that flow from them, causing even more and greater harm, a vicious cycle, like taking other kid's sneakers. Otherwise, so many making astonishing contributions as musicians, indisputably genius at times, athletes, artists, dancers, singers, writers, critics and comedians, many of our very best, and this guy? Though no athlete, writer, musician or genius from what could be observed, he was just plain, naturally cool, like without even trying, the way he walked, the way his khaki uniform fit, relaxed and casual while still perfectly

appointed and worn, *stressless*, with his military gate as if it all came easy, the military life, and there was the way he spoke, softly, pointedly without added volume or vulgarity as punctuation. None. He just had it: quiet, cool, together, confident command. One afternoon, shortly after they first approached me about being the company education officer, he called me into his office and told me, in response to my expressed and genuine doubt regarding my suitability, before even getting the complete sentence out, "I'm not sure-" with his characteristically serene surety cut me off with "*now was the time to find out*." The bridge. It was the way he said it, again quietly but with eye contact, it was him, a cool fellow who had gotten a grip, he said it, *man to man* to a nineteen year old. Respect. Him I didn't want to disappoint but would anyway, *born to lose*, inside, someplace deep, self-destruction, more suited to the *monkey house* than the officer's club. Musta' had something to do with my upbringing or reaction to it, failure, that or my DNA, maybe all three, spitting in my tear drenched face, not that I'm blaming anyone or anything, it was me, my shots to call, just trying to state the case as objectively and clearly as possible. Bizarrely enough, all the former desire to go to sea and chase whales evaporated almost as soon as the bus emptied out on the Camp Nimitz blacktop, replaced by a generalized bitterness directing me to rebel, react and withdraw, the doomsday clock to failure ticking as it'd always done, just like with the Cub Scouts, high school, and Buck's Rock. Here would be no different, except for the telling fact that unlike those listed the military path was not imposed, it was chosen.

The daily run was troublesome, we had to do like two point something miles in like fifteen or so minutes, but the new recruit wasn't used to that much sustained exertion. The most exercise he ever got, aside pushups for show was the quick, fiery, blast of the occasional fistfight but they only last two or three minutes and this running thing went on five times that duration so I huffed and puffed with shin-splints and dry, winded lungs until after only five or six minutes on the track felt ready to quit, really, coughing, wheezing, a smoker without his breath – never mind rebel, more like a quitter

without a cause, aside deepening his ever-lowering self esteem, without even a clue as to *how to* or even the *why of* overcoming a routine difficulty and seeing even a single challenge through to success – but here, in this rare instance when thankfully, they, the institution, the Navy, make a stand and just don't let you let yourself. No quitting. Period. Bravo! *Ahoy matey!* Until they do. During one memorable run the company PhysEd "officer" – another recruit, a short, squat, athletically built, red-headed tough kid with a classical Greek first or last name like Adonis or Nicholas got right behind me struggling on the track, inches and *would not let me give in or surrender to failure* – would not allow it – that was his job – the company PhysEd officer – he just kept right on behind me where without putting a hand on me, shouted encouragement with such a sustained, close and relentless force, much as I was willing to quit, my lungs and shins begging to I just couldn't give up, he forced it out of my mind and my body obeyed, one foot after the next, again and again and again, forward, *these legs* I felt, he's drilling me and it's working, like that time in the ring at six or seven at Beach Haven, he tapped into that dormant, stubborn pride, that *can do*, so much so that to my surprise I made it, the full run and in time, finishing with the rest, even outpacing a few other breathless stragglers. The cool, black CPO was watching and gave me the slightest but unmistakable nod of recognition. He saw me struggling and show what he would call "*heart.*" *This is where you find out.* But it wasn't enough. An outlier. The steady, stubborn will to fail still dogged me, relentlessly like a minefield where ever I tread that would not allow for success at anything other than a doomed and tragically wasted life of bottom surfing, scrambling for crumbs, embracing defeat like it was a virtue, the one Borough Park Pops warned lay in wait for me, "*a park bench,*" a "*shoe salesman,*" and maybe even "*death row.*"

Another time we were marching, arranged in twenty rows of five columns lined up from front to back according to height, tall in the front, me being in the next to last row at the rear, so tired and inattentive, daydreaming to the cadence didn't hear the call "to the

rear *hut*" which meant *about face* so suddenly instead of being at the back of the column was now almost at the very front but facing the *wrong way* and about to get stomped widen toy soldier style by more than 90 hypnotized recruits marching to the CPO's commands which after two or three weeks of drilling several times a day, everyday they heard and robotically obeyed. You're supposed to be paying attention. That's the point. Focus. *Demerit.*

Navy Seal training anyone? They brought us into a barracks set up like a small movie theater to watch a short, maybe twenty-minute film on UDT – Underwater Demolition Technician, SEAL training, SEAL, an acronym for sea, air, and land where they take it to the enemy. They weren't trying to sell it rather they were presenting it clearly then making the offer available. At the end of which they asked for a show of hands, *who's up to the challenge*? Out of 100 guys? Zero. Not one. Not even the Greek. I was having trouble just keeping my locker squared away, boots polished and the basic run. The others? Well they knew themselves and therefore knew better. Pass. Bless those guys who try and more to those that fulfill. Without them we'd all likely be third-class citizens, little more than slaves grunting in Russian, German, Japanese or Chinese.

Then there was the near outbreak of a fistfight seated in some barrack lobby for a medical check or something with a tall, ugly, dark-haired recruit dude from somewhere in the midwest who didn't much like me nor I him, it wasn't personal, not a all, we were strangers, it was purely visceral and though it never went to blows, after just the right words, facial expressions and postures we both jumped up quick and advanced towards each other about to swing before it was stopped by the other company recruits but landed me, maybe him too yet *another* demerit. One night in the quiet barracks at about 3 AM, in my half sleep a vague nightmare woke and alerted me to the near presence of helmeted guy on foot patrol making one of the lights-out rounds, another recruit with a flashlight in one hand and a baton in the other. In this semi-conscious state my primal alarm was triggered, so leapt lightening fast out of the rack, landing

in a half-crouch attack posture only steps away from him startling both of us with the sudden display my subconscious issued. After a second or two like that, now fully awake calmed then stood back down. No muss, no fuss. While it may have earned me another demerit or not – probably no one else saw and he let it go, but even if it hadn't it was characteristic of the nature of my screw-ups which were mounting up at a rate far outpacing the maximum allowable number for an eight-week stint, now up to about ten after only three and a half weeks which was close to the max allotted for the entire term. Shortly after and due to that it was decided that the time had come for a serious, no laughing now *pow-wow* with the entire troop of Recruit Division Commanders including my two company CPOs, the Seaman Recruit wasn't cutting it.

By then I'd already decided it was time to leave, this party was over, the sailor fantasy had to be put on hold for now, possibly gotten back to another day, possibly buried forever like a dead whale carcass at the bottom of *la mer*. For now though, apparently succeeding at routine failure again figured it was probably now time to head back to the other Long Beach, the eastern one back in New York. That's where what there ever might have been of a *comfort zone* still was. At least there the sojourner could be lost, aimless and alone on more familiar ground. As far as the threat from the farewell messages left at the bungalow inspiring any possible payback they might try, no one other than Carrie saw me enter or exit, and she only from her car while the foul deed was done behind the closed door, so there were in fact no actual witnesses, anyhow it wasn't gonna deter me, for that I felt prepared, even if it meant a return to Gladiator School at the Monkey House, simply put, if they somehow started with me again, I'd finish them this time. In that Long Beach ol' Kabbo knew how to handle himself better than that, usually, so it wouldn't likely come to anything, they weren't in my league of trouble-people, their judgment was skewed and hearts were cold but that's all, after those ugly consequences they might have sharpened up a bit and treated folks, especially vulnerable and in need folks a little bit better, like maybe with *kindness*, a little *love thy neighbor*

as thyself stuff, but who knew or even cared now? It might get nasty anyway so it was good that I felt *ready* for them either way before heading back, though *ready* meant constant trouble and high stakes risks like bar fights, bluffs, beat-ups, handcuffs, lockups and occasional stints of homelessness. *Ready* like that. Fuck'n doomed, embracing defeat, it demands so little, only humble resignation, perhaps some passing shame then it was over, the challenge, dependable, comfortable failure, and defeat. In contrast? Along with success comes a continuing line of challenges, the pressure of sustaining performance, expectations great and small, like on the training track at Nimitz, once everyone sees you can do it, even seeing it yourself, the excuses feel even thinner so better to let sleeping dogs lie, the devil we know for the devil we don't, resigned to a life of bottom feeding, drifting and the pits. The *California Dreamin'* and *the* w*est is the best* fantasies were just about played out, like an empty bowl of cooked weed, this latest, longest bus trip and most recent cross-country adventure were coming to yet another ignominious close. Now, all that was left was convincing them, the Navy higher-ups which turned out surprisingly not that difficult, like with Carrie in Shaker Heights, I expected a heavier *push-back* from them but it never came, they just about conceded right away and let me go. Okay. My loss, not really theirs. Later, a retired Vietnam War hero pal of mine, a lifer in the service and army major, Richard Green, suggested that they failed too, and he oughta' know, one time over-riding military orders by piloting his helicopter into a designated "no-fire zone" to rescue a train wreck full of wounded civilians, taking and returning enemy fire almost the entire mission while succeeding in saving many innocent lives. Vietnamese lives. Rag, as his friends call him, knows how to get things done. Back at Nimitz though, it was the *touchy-feely* seventies where group therapy and *cushy* "self acceptance" trumped group responsibility and the healthy, traditional respect for the discipline often required to straighten out youthful character flaws, so it was relatively easy to slip out and slip away from social commitments, even vital obligations like a solemn and sworn oath to defend one's country. They just didn't want to hassle, instead put up some token,

half-hearted, resistance. It only took about three or four days of formal meetings with a Navy shrink and a higher up or two of sticking to my line: *this was a mistake*, *mine, I was only going to be in more and more trouble here* and wanted to *save everybody* especially myself *the agony of a long, drawn out and all but inevitable descent into the stockade.* The still active, though supposedly "unsupervised" felony probation in NY was my ace, admitting that despite it being on record, I had slipped by and through the background check and swearing in without its discovery, thinking if all else fails, that'll get me discharged, one way or another. I never told them about mentioning it to Lee, that would've been ratting, and ratting on a dude that helped me out, so not on the menu, even if I needed it to be, that was between him and me, like the extra chits. In any case, about the probation? No one even blinked. They didn't care, guess it made no difference, and they were too busy signing papers and turning pages to even talk about it. One officer, a kindly professional type, after looking at my file and noting my family background suggested that I too – like my parents had – could *make something* out of myself if I gave myself and the Navy a fairer try. Deaf ears. It just wasn't me, wasn't into *making something out of myself* those days, rather accepted myself as a chronic, purposeful loser, a high-school drop-out, a convicted felon and homeless vagrant, fulfilling my assigned destiny. That was me, the *shoe salesman* on the *park bench* on his way to *death row*. Another guy, also an officer warned I might regret the decision in time – he was right – I do – one of my very few – if there's any one thing in my life I could do over that would be it – there are maybe one or two others, not small, everyday things, plenty of them on the minor scale like everybody else has of little to no consequence – I mean major events like this, life-shaping, character-defining: dropping out of high-school, quitting the wrestling team after only three workouts and up to then, this – that's about it, but like the major suggested and now I kinda', sorta' maybe believe a little bit, it was their failure too – not that it makes it any less regretful, a loss is a loss, it doesn't – but they should have done me like the PhysEd guy did, instead of letting me off the hook so easily – maybe they

should have followed through on the CPO's plan, put me in *PosMo* (positive motivation camp) and pushed me there as hard as necessary until my "*mind got right*" and with the program – not asking for my opinion or allowing me to cop-out so early in the game, never learning by experience, the best possible teacher or even by example what it was like to stumble or even keep on stumbling only to get back up, again and again for as long as it takes like I had for possibly the first and only time in life up to then, learning to ride a two-wheeler back home in Brooklyn at six or seven, never again after even considered the notion of an earned success, so foreign to me that idea was, or that failure was not actually inevitable, huh?; my belief was that *if I couldn't do something, anything right away that meant I couldn't do it at all, ever, period*, never imagining that one could keep trying and with effort occasionally succeed; one could switch tracks and get off the park bench like in Macarthur's. It could have been done though – they could have, I was still reachable, gone but not too far at only nineteen and that's what's supposed to happen, that's what the military and if necessary *PosMo* are for. *No?* Most boys need men to look up to like the black CPO, men who are stronger and who won't give up even after giving up on themselves – that's the crucible, make or break time like on that running track, the necessary push. I couldn't have done it without a steady, sustained and significant pressure from outside, not then – not with my level of expectation dictated by a sorrowful lack of any meaningful self-esteem, mostly fantasy and bluff in its place. This Seaman Recruit needed help growing up, charting a course and taking responsibility – which is my impression the armed forces *forced* young men to do as they served their countries, one hand washing the other, *so-to-say*, but it just didn't go down that way at *this man's Navy* in the winter of '78 and maybe by way of acknowledging their failure too, buffeted by my candid admissions, they graciously awarded me an *Honorable* instead of a General, even if it wasn't, or maybe for just enlisting and swearing the oath and not ending up in the brig, my big, patriotic contribution. Who knows? They didn't want to ruin my life over these basically harmless and unforced, totally self-inflicted

errors. Thanks *Uncle Sam* and thank Zeus they did, at least I don't have to suffer that lifetime of shame and stigma, getting off easy that time with leniency and generosity, *the kindness of strangers* in the well-known and fitting phrase.

In the transit section of the base, a cluster of barracks sealed off from the rest of the camp – quarantined for the outgoing – in a loser's retreat of the unfit, they stripped me of all the property that they previously issued: notebooks, toothpaste, underwear, pens and pencils and the like. You walk down a long hallway stopping at each of several rooms where sitting behind a desk is a very bored Navy clerk responsible for the safe and timely return of all this and that, organized so that at one room you surrender, for example your writing implements, the next your toothbrush and paste, another your denims, boots, etc., 'til all that was given was now returned, taken back, no problem, a painless procedure until getting to the room where they wanted back the neat little, plastic coated green and white military ID card, the one with the cool picture of me in a military crew cut looking all young and determined, smug and tough. *That* was cool, that I wanted to keep. The clerks working these desks couldn't care less about what they were supposed to be doing, they weren't chasing whales or hunting for Soviet subs off the coasts, so long as it at least looked like they were going through the proper motions if any body who even might have cared at all, doubtful but possible even bothered to walk by and notice, so, by the grace of Zeus' lightning again, right after handing over the high-value item, the instant the young desk jockey happened to turn his attention momentarily elsewhere, in a flash snatched it right back and pocketed the prize artifact for posterity. Oddly enough, despite our proximity in the close quarters he never even noticed or if he had didn't bother to react so without any further *adieu*, on to the next little room to drop off my used *skivvies* I marched, then on to the next and the next until the ritual was completed and deed fully done. All items accounted for, almost. *A decent little souvenir* of the trip for my troubles, the ID card, little realizing at the time that by grabbing it so quickly and not getting caught the essential seed was

planted for another crazy chapter soon to come, as it turned out, it wasn't quite as over as it seemed, I'd get another chance, take it and dive in, as if a plan had been custom designed on Olympus for a floundering landlubber like me to sail with but no matter, for now? It's another crazy, highly unlikely, perhaps even unique tale, perhaps worth telling in another volume, another time.

The next three or four days spent in the transit depot, listening to the great Clarence Clemons of the E Street Band wail on his sax to Springsteen's magnificent magnum opus *Jungleland* and feeling like a homeless, homesick loser, I slunked around, head hanging low while the most pressing concern now was *how in the hell was I gonna buy beer* when I finally got off base as the drinking age in sunny San Diego was twenty-one and the *buzz-cut* was a dead giveaway of my general status, military or former, active or reserve and the ID card, which the merchants would invariably demand had both my D.O.B and my picture, a tough nut to crack. Something told me this navy town was gonna be real strict about it and for sure it was so like most outfits in those days, way too strict for this boozing, young nomad, now ex-seaman recruit to navigate meaning it was time to split, time to head back east. *East ain't the least* I tried to console and encourage myself, back to *Jungleland*. I'd been away a few months by then, *a nice stretch*, especially for a kid on his own so young and without any earthly support or independent experience in life besides jail stints and the year spent in a county-run therapy cult. As soon as the bursar handed me a couple of checks totaling just over a grand, a huge sum, *travel pay* they called it and for the month or so of *active-duty*, and my walking papers, the essential DD-214 I was already mentally preparing, even somewhat eager to once again hit the road.

After pondering the present for a few relatively uneventful nights in another skid-row dive in downtown San Diego – my usual, appropriately stationed by the bus terminal, and visiting porno stores between hustling beer bottles somehow – possibly via the tried and true method of shoplifting, which manages to skirt both the *pain-in-*

the-ass age requirement and the petty nuisance of having to pay for them, I concluded with finality that *it was over*, for certain, this trip done; all that was left was to turn back and get home, whatever that meant, familiar ground, back to *Jungleland*. Yes. And though I never saw any surfboards or bikinis, I did have an adventure like those bus trips back and forth on Coney Island Avenue, only ten years later and thousands of miles farther and thus far survived. A day or so before boarding the bus back east decided there was still time to make a trip to the famed *San Diego Zoo,* just to see what made it so famous compared to the famed Bronx Zoo on my coast which never really *wowed* me, big animals in small cages, *so what?* It's a horror. Anyhow, taking a local bus the half-hour there, whereupon getting off at the designated stop and approaching the facility entrance, I couldn't help but notice a long folding table outdoors on the front lawn, just off the zoo entrance, with two or three young people sitting behind it, watching the tourist crowds arrive, greeting everyone with friendly smiles and words of interest and encouragement: *enjoy the zoo – where you comin' from? – have fun* – that sort of fluffy stuff. They were casually well dressed, in their twenties, attractive, clean and seemed very much at home and relaxed in this space, while their specific roles and aims were not immediately obvious – did they work for the zoo? The state? A local business? What were they selling? Where were their bikinis and surfboards? What was their deal – so outgoing and friendly to random strangers? Why were they positioned so prominently and by whom? A guy and two chicks in their twenties or two guys and a chick, whatever, but the chick grabbed my attention. They had some brightly colored literature in neat stacks at one end of the table, which they were pushing as handouts. Deciding to check'm out further – musta' been the estrogen, and simply out of natural curiosity turned in their direction – as soon as they noticed me moving towards them began focusing their attention almost exclusively on me. Now, for sure this hurtin' for certain pup was just then, a lost and lonesome loser and so pretty open to smiles and kind words which they seemed abundant with and like with the stacked glossy literature happy to share – asking me about me and

what a New Yorker was doing out there and what my plans were, etc. As we exchanged small talk, smiles and general information, they began inviting me to meet with them and their friends later that day for a meal and more happy talk which was when the internal alarm bells started going off. *Who's that friendly?* I don't have anything anyone could possibly want besides a few bucks and a one-way bus ticket which they don't even know about; the conversation never got that deep, so *what gives here?* Who's so generous with their interest, time, and invitations and so randomly indiscriminate? Something ain't right but what could it be? They looked okay, the three of them, bright, clean and cheery, sober and friendly, like the Osmonds in Disneyland, and I'd never heard of *Scientology* before that, but that's what it said in their literature. Then I got it. At just slightly closer inspection it became clear that these folks, whatever they were up to behind the scenes or selling up front were bent in some bizarre direction, weirder even than mine and what was needed just then was not more *happy talk* from other misfit oddballs but to get away from them and from the west entirely now, quit while still ahead, more or less, at least while still able, not locked up for jaywalking or stabbing a homo, away like far away back to the east coast, forget *the best* and keep *the rest*. Bad as I truly felt, didn't need far-out, dishonest cult-salesmen so obviously on the *look-good* to boost me with happy horseshit and well-practiced smiles in exchange for *who-knows-what?* Like the Long Beach mission, what? My soul? No way. My better instincts kicked in for a change, advising *I'd just gotten released from a one year stint in a court-mandated cult* and wasn't about to mandate myself into another, not my scene, even the promise of fulfilling my sailor's dream couldn't hold me here so these goofy huckleberries with their free meals and cheap smiles had no chance, not even the chick, none at all. If a final push was needed just to be certain of the timeliness of my pending exit, this was it, these clowns with those fake smiles and their glossy brochures, there was nothing here for me, and besides, as stated before, I already had a good old-fashioned, bible thumping religion. Nothing at all. Hallelujah everybody. I'll say it again, I'm outa' here. *Baruch ha Shem*. All aboard!

Last stop. A trip back to nowhere.

On another long trip on another lonesome Greyhound back to the Big Apple I thought about the crushed souls slaving away at Barton's, grown men selling baby furniture, sweating cribs and bassinettes like shoe salesmen, the horror at the prospect of returning there, *fuckface* Marvin with his irritating scowls, skinny Sal the rat prying loose a grubbed cigarette from his pack for me, it wasn't gonna happen. I'd rather be a Moonie than endure that *morning regularity.* I thought about bare legged Carrie and the drunken enthusiasm of throwing empty beer cans out her window while fleeing my entire known life across the George Washington Bridge, her muted expression, unwilling to hide the growing disgust. Trashing the bungalow seemed like such a long time ago, it was just after Thanksgiving '77 when we left and now it was nearly spring '78, when at still only nineteen was already going back, head low, tale tucked beneath, almost like the *turn-around* bus rides in Brooklyn but without Carrie, without joining the fleet and even less self-respect than starting with. I flashed-back to the momentary exhilaration of that early Texas morning, those old, iron six-guns in the pawn shop window with the blinding sunlight reflecting off the barrels. I probably spent the silver dollar on a beer or a burrito, maybe a joint, might've even just outright lost it, now *out-of-luck* again I thought of Carol with the black eye in the bathtub, the bearded, drunken biker and his sudden loyalty pledge and my high-school *good-time-Charlie's bon voyage* party, Michael LaRue, the Kansas City bus terminal, the rooftops, the race track at San Andrea and porno house in downtown LA, the cool, black, CPO in the pressed khakis who told me "*now was the time to find out*" and now I was depressed, I found out. No *heart*. I let myself down, again, still. I never thought seriously of getting a *born to lose* tattoo but it occurred to me why others might. And unlike my drifting along Ocean Parkway days, I had no *home* to go back to this time, just a coast and a state, New York, maybe Long Beach, maybe not, but for sure not to my parents or the cursed Rock, neither to the *Droogs*, not to Topic House, and not to Sherry, not even to Jenny again, not to

anywhere at all, just somewhere in the east, somewhere outside the Port Authority, somewhere off Times Square. *At least this time,* I consoled myself, *I didn't retreat into a patrol car sent by grownups to find their missing runaway kids on the turnpike*, maybe I would have if someone sent one but those days were long passed. I was older now, my teenage years mostly behind me and this time I'd spent a few nights in the weeds, of that there was no doubt, plenty of weeds out there across the *amber waves of grain*.

As I watched the highway flying by through those magna-vision bus windows, interstate onto interstate, back on the road, another cross-country journey, Howard Johnsons on top of McDonalds on top of Exxons, the great American *telescopic freeway*, whether it was one coast or another, from as many points back as could be recalled to as far forward as could ever be imagined, I realized while gazing down at the Navy Recruit's smug mug on the stolen ID card staring back up at me, with vivid clarity and maybe for the first time that while I was still free, as free as completely and irreversibly cast adrift could be, without a compass or a map, I would likely and forever remain so, for better and worse, lost or found, east or west, *macro velocity* – free as the wind, sole author of my life's unfolding tale and entirely on my own.